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OR,
Dan Garland's Great Clean-Up.

BY W. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "DERRINGER DECK," "HURRAH
HARRY," "HANDS UP," "THE DUDE FROM
DENVER," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

MR. GREEN GETS IN EARNEST.

THE south bound stage for Broad Ax was rolling along at a fair rate of speed. It was only comfortably well filled, the road was in fair condition, and so were the horses, while the weather was about all that could be expected. Nevertheless, the passengers were not having a very delectable time.

The society of that "hearse" was decidedly mixed; and the elements did not mingle worth a cent, to use the explanation that one of the cargo afterward employed, in speaking of the trip.

Leaving out of account Long Pete, the veteran driver, who attended strictly to his ribbons, and left other matters to run themselves, there was, first and foremost—in his own estimation, any—

"GENTLEMEN," SAID THE MAN WITH THE SMILE, BEAMING AROUND ON EVERYBODY, "HE SAID HE WAS GOING TO HURT ME, AND I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT ELSE TO DO."

how—Orange Able, one of the mighty bad men of Broad Ax, who was returning to that brisk mining-camp after a trip to the north in search of victims, or something else.

There was no question about his position. Several men in the stage, who knew him well, whispered the information when he got on board, and acted with a deference that showed they were anxious to pay all possible respect to such a man of war.

In addition to being a bad man he was a braggart. And the person who took him up with the idea that he was nothing but the latter was badly fooled. He was ready to use his revolvers on the slightest provocation, and sometimes without any at all.

This was not exactly the kind of a companion that Doctor Farley would have chosen as a fellow-passenger for himself, to say nothing of the fact that on the present occasion he was accompanied by his daughter, Nina, who was a handsome girl of twenty, and altogether a stranger to the ways of the "wild and woolly West." The doctor himself had been in such company before, and understood the habits of the animal; but this was the nearest that Nina had ever come to a "bad" man, and she showed that she did not like the breed at all. As the only lady in the coach her position was the more uncomfortable. Had there been another woman present, who had been properly seasoned to the climate and its productions, her example might have put Nina more at her ease, since she would have seen how such exhibitions were to be treated.

It is possible that, if the doctor and his daughter had been the sole inside passengers, and Orange Able had joined them, he would have passed for a fair specimen of the noblemen that nature builds up out of the raw material she finds in the mountains or on the plains. He was not a bad-looking sort of individual in face or figure, and he would most likely have lounged quietly in his seat for the greater part of the journey.

Unfortunately for the peace of mind of Miss Nina, there were a few other passengers who had inside seats, and one of them had excited the malice of Able from the very first.

He entered the coach in a hesitating sort of way, and glanced around as though he was not certain that he belonged there. If the doctor looked as though he had been in the East, this young man looked as though he ought to be there now. He was dressed in garments that were serviceable enough, but there was an unfortunate attempt at style about them, that irritated Orange Able at first sight, and called his attention to the face of the passenger that owned them.

A glance at that was enough to resolve all doubts. It was "tenderfoot" all over. No man who had roamed long in these regions could carry that innocent look; and that smile would have been joked or beaten out of him in the first camp he had seriously attempted to locate in. It was a broad smile, a genial smile, a piece of property that made one think the man who carried it had not much of anything else.

Now, Mr. Able was not particularly caring whether any one whom he selected as his butt resented his attentions or not; but, in this case, he was reasonably sure that there was no danger of catching a Tartar, so he amused himself with the young man, accordingly.

The wit was rather coarse; but, really, Able was trying to abstain from saying anything that might be offensive to the young lady; and it was more the suggestiveness of his manner than any threats he made that caused the young lady to feel so nervous for the fresh-faced traveler with the smile. She believed that the bully intended to force him into a fight, and about the result of the encounter she had but little doubt. It seemed to her, as Orange was so very much the larger man, that in a struggle he could crush the youth without an effort, and she was still more certain that he was an adept in handling the liberal array of weapons he carried strung around him. The young man, on the contrary, seemed to be entirely unarmed, and unconscious of the fact that such improvident ways were considered a direct tempting of Providence in the country to which he had drifted.

Miss Nina tried not to listen, but found that it was impossible not to hear something of what was said. She learned early in the day that the name of this young man was Stephen Greene, and that he was going to Broad Ax in search of employment, and, as a secondary matter, to look for an uncle of his, from whom he had heard nothing for some years.

Orange Able would never have lost his temper, as he certainly did on several occasions during the day, if he could have broken through the obtuseness that was shield and buckler to this innocent young man.

Sneer, jest, outrageous lying, or savage truth, were all the same to Stephen; any and every statement he swallowed like so much spring water, and his smile broadened in proportion to the depth of the affront that Orange attempted to place on him.

This thing lasted until it grew monotonous. Now and then Able relapsed into a moody silence, but, after a while, he would return to the charge, and was met as usual with a guile-

lessness that imagined no harm. Though he disguised his feelings pretty well Nina saw at length that her father was being affected by it, and that increased her discomfort. When they stopped for dinner she would have said something to him about it but she had hopes that the young man would find it convenient to change to the outside of the coach, or even remain over a day. When she saw him clambering back she hastily whispered something of her fears to the doctor.

Doctor Farley shook his head. He had taken the measure of Orange Able pretty thoroughly, and did not care to discuss his points where there was a chance of being overheard. When Nina asked him to think if there was nothing to do to save the young man from the danger that she was sure was impending he shook his head again, and surprised her very much by his answer.

"Don't worry about such things, little one. Shut your eyes and close your ears. If it will do you any good to hear it, I might say that I have been trembling myself; but it was for the other man. I may be mistaken, but I have a haunting idea that I have seen this young fellow, or heard of him, before. If I am right, and there is an actual difficulty, I would not be surprised if it would be the other man who would be dead at the end of it. Mr. Greene, however, seems inclined to allow things to run on without taking serious affront; and it may be it is your presence that restrains him. He is certainly very much of a gentleman, considering. Do not worry, then. I think there will be no corpses to bring in at the end of the trip, though I suspect that Able will hear from his man later on."

In the light of this Miss Nina did not feel quite so uncomfortable during the rest of the journey, and the "nagging" by Able annoyed her far less than it had done in the earlier part of the day.

The "chief" grew more boastful as the day wore on, though now and then he gave them a rest as he lounged back in his seat with closed eyes.

It was not far off from sundown when the coach rolled into the Broad Ax, and halted in front of "The Western Continent," the best hotel in the town.

The coach door was opened by John Johnson, the genial proprietor of the house, and, first of all, Miss Nina was assisted to alight.

A handsome young lady is sure of all due attention anywhere; and at Broad Ax she was apt to receive a double portion. The male sex there were most devout admirers of beauty, and spent a large share of their spare time in lamenting that there was so little opportunity to show it. Having relieved her of the package and shawl which she held, Mr. Johnson waved his hand toward the porch, and evidently supposed that the young lady would lose no time in getting away from the crowd of loungers scattered so thickly around the stage that it was only at his motion a road opened toward that haven of refuge.

But the young lady seemed altogether unconscious of the crowd, and of the admiring glances cast in her direction. She nodded to the worthy proprietor, as much as to say she understood him; but she waited for her father, all the same. And, after the doctor had leisurely stepped to the ground, and gathered her arm in his, and turned to go, she did not seem to be in any greater haste.

The truth was, she had some curiosity to see what was going to follow when her fellow-passengers had reached their journey's end. Would Orange Able be as good as his word? He had hinted, finally, that there would be some fun when they all got to Broad Ax, and by this time Nina's education had been sufficiently advanced for her to understand the meaning of the term when used in such a connection.

And in case the "fun" began, what was going to be the result? After what her father had said she had felt much easier, though at times there was a harrowing doubt whether this apparently guileless youth could by any possibility be more than a plaything in the hands of the stalwart ruffian.

When Doctor Farley had removed a step or two from in front of the door, Orange made his appearance. It did not take a second glance for those who knew him best to see that the world was not revolving exactly to suit him, and when the mild face of the innocent Mr. Greene appeared over his shoulder there were some who suspected exactly what was the matter.

"It allers does make him sick ter see a tender-huff slingin' on style ov that kind," was the way the nearest loafer put it, in a thick whisper, to his pard.

"Ef you wait a holy minnit you'll see him a clawin' at ther wool. I kin see blud in his eye. An' I'd sooner it 'ud be that lamb than me. He's goin' ter git it hot. Now you jest remember."

This happened to be the general opinion, and it attracted the attention of the crowd so much, and so quickly that Nina was quite forgotten. Ordinarily her mere presence would have had a restraining influence, but as she had been forgotten the show went on, to the anticipated delight of everybody. When Orange Able stood a little

to one side, watching darkly while the innocent-looking stranger let himself carefully down, everyone was on the *qui vive* for what was to come next.

"Yes, Stephen, this is Broad Ax," said Able, as he sidled up to the object of his solicitude. "We have arrived there at last, and before you get done with it I'm open to bet big money that you'll be wishin' that you had gone 'round ther other way, an' not come at all. They don't stand much style here, an' ef you put on the style that you've been slingin' at my head all day, it won't be long before you are put to bed with a shovel, and Jimmy Robinson will be tucking in the bed-clothes so there won't be any danger of your takin' cold. I'm the most peaceable man in the world, but you made my blood just boil. If you come down here to Broad Ax to laugh at us you may as well say the word, and we'll fix the whole thing up right here and now. What's it going to be—peace or war? Say it quick; but say it mighty slow."

"I don't know that I exactly appreciate your meaning," responded Greene, with a bewildered sort of a smile, and looking helplessly around. "Are your intentions seriously in earnest?"

"You'll find them something that way before getting through with them."

"Then, there is nothing like being in earnest also," retorted Mr. Greene, and as he spoke he bit.

It was straight from the shoulder, and Orange Able shut together like a jack-knife, and went down.

CHAPTER II.

CHRISS CROCKLY BEGINS A BANTER.

ALTHOUGH it may detract from the interest of the story it is as well to say right here that for some little time Orange Able had been haunted with the idea that perhaps he had caught a Tartar. There was something altogether too tranquil about this tenderfoot from 'wayback. It did not seem possible that such innocence could be abroad, and the thought that he was being played with made Able's blood get several degrees higher, above fever heat.

He wanted to satisfy himself. Otherwise he would no doubt have waited for a more convenient and appropriate season to finish up the young man with a smile. Of course, he did not doubt the result, whoever the individual might turn out to be. He would not have taken water for the king of the coast, and he was ready, as he thought, for any demonstration that might follow his own.

He was satisfied.

Mr. Greene's arm was extended like a flash of lightning, and it really seemed as though he swung a ton along with it. Orange did not even attempt to guard; and had nothing to say for the next ten minutes.

The crowd first satisfied itself that the fallen chief could not bear, and then roared. There was a great deal of satisfaction in the affair, for two thirds of the audience; but, previous experience had made everybody a little cautious about letting it be seen until it was a sure thing that it would not be noticed by the fallen hero.

"Gentlemen," said the man with the smile, beaming around on everybody, "I don't know much about your customs here at Broad Ax, but where I belong it is a square thing to hit when the other fellow puts a chip up, and I only did the best I knew how. I am a stranger to your town, and sorry am I to begin my residence by such a display. He said he was going to hurt me, and I didn't know what else to do."

"Oh, that is all right," laughed half a dozen, who had been more or less delighted.

"Orange proclaims himself a chief on all possible occasions, and so you can't go wrong when you take him down a peg or two. But look out for him when he gets awake. He won't be apt to let the matter rest here, and the next time he comes for you it will be with the drop. Look a little out before you try to fool with him then. He's not a man that you can do that twice to. You won't know it, but his finger will be on the trigger, and he will shoot to kill."

Such was the general drift of the warning, though it was conveyed by several persons. They spoke in serious earnest, too; and Greene could see that there was no attempt to chaff him, but that it was all with a good intention.

The smile had not left his face, however; and he simply shrugged his shoulders, as they spoke. It was a question whether he understood the warning, for, if he did, it would have been natural for him to have at least asked for some further explanation. He could hardly help but see that he had, to a certain extent, obtained the good will of many there. Instead, he made a step toward the door of the Western Continent, as though he thought it was more important to get within the range of its accommodations than to learn about the particular methods of the badness of the man who was likely to lie in wait for him.

Orange was not without his friends and admirers, if he had been counted out for the present. Two or three of them had been anxiously examining his neck, and feeling in the neighborhood of the place where his heart was supposed to lie. They had wit enough to see that

the blow he had received was terrific in its force, and it was possible that his neck was broken.

The stroke had been given too high up for that, however; and it was found that he was simply knocked out. The application of a convenient pocket flask was next in order, and in the course of a few minutes the bully began to show signs of returning consciousness. It was time that his henchmen were doing something. When he came to, he might begin by asking why they let his man get away.

A couple of them stepped between Greene and the porch.

"Jest hold on a mite, mister! Frum what Orange said I reckon you begun this thing afore you got here, an' hev bin tryin' ter lead him up to whar you could make a circus ov him. That's all well ernuff, ez long ez there's no harm done; but, ef you broke his neck in your fool play, that's somethin' else, an' we'll be wantin' ter know what it war all about afore we see yer slip out ov this crowd. Ef you please, jest hold on tell we see ef he's dead; er Orange are able ter give an account ov hisself."

Very threatening were the looks and words of the rough, as he moved in the way of the young man, a hand on the butt of a revolver that swung conveniently at his hip. At the same time he was careful to strike the pathway to the door at a distance that would give him time to draw in case the stranger showed any sign of resentment. He felt it to the bottom of his soul that at fistcuffs he was no match for the man that was able to knock Orange Able out with one blow.

Behind the speaker were two or three others, who were fully as cautious, and every whit as threatening in their looks. If it had been a little darker the chances are that some one would have been shooting before this; but, though the gang ran the town very much after its own notions, they knew that a murder by daylight, of a stranger, would not be allowed to pass unnoticed, and there were too many witnesses there to make it a matter of doubt who pulled trigger if a shot was fired.

During all this, Doctor Farley and his daughter were standing on the porch, taking a calm view of the proceedings. There was nothing very surprising in them to the doctor, since he had been a resident of the place for over a year; but to Nina it was a revelation for which the geography taught in the boarding-school in the East, from which she had just graduated, had not prepared her. If she had not been a young lady of unusual nerve it is likely that the sight would have filled her with wild alarm.

It was no particular discredit to her nerves that she viewed this interference of the friends of the fallen man with some alarm, and called the attention of her father to it, in rather an anxious manner. The doctor had been looking on with interest, and without being very wildly agitated. In these days he was steady as a judge; but there was a time when he had elsewhere been known as "one of the boys," and had been able to hold his own in almost any circle.

All that had been over for years, and Broad Ax had only known him as a dignified, capable physician, who had been practicing in that town with great success, and who was now bringing his daughter to live there, since he had determined to make it his permanent place of residence.

The doctor might have hesitated about having Nina there, much as he wanted her society, had it not been for a certain reason that will be more clearly explained further on. It seemed to him that it was important she should be brought under his eye for the present, and between his practice and the interest he had in the Good Hope Mine, it was too great a sacrifice for him to leave Broad Ax, save as a dernier resort.

He knew that curiosity as to his daughter, who was expected by this stage, had brought together the crowd which had greeted them, and if Stephen Greene developed as he more than half expected him to, he was just the shining example the father wished to set before his daughter, of what a mild-mannered, genteel appearing fellow might be and do if he was what the world would call "something of a sport."

Nevertheless he did not want the affair to grow into a man-killing riot, and he thought a number of good men there would follow his lead if he interfered in a mild though firm way. He knew the leader of the roughs who were making play until Able should recover his senses, and did not believe that he would do anything very desperate, unless backed by the tacit consent of the bystanders. At Nina's request he stepped forward.

"A moment if you please, gentlemen. I am not in the habit of mixing in such brawls, as you are very well aware, but in this case I think it my duty to disabuse your minds of any false impressions. I have been a witness of the rise and progress of the trouble, and I must say that Orange got no more than he deserved. He has spent the day in stirring up the young man, greatly to the discomfort of the other passengers; and it is greatly to the stranger's credit that he should have controlled his temper under the most trying circumstances, when he seems so abundantly able to take his own part. I think,

to preserve the credit of the town, that this thing had better be brought to an end right here and now. If Mr. Able chooses to reopen the affair when he gets better able than he is now, that will be a different matter; but certainly, no one else has any call to fight his battles. Crockly, you had better stand aside. You have no quarrel with the gentleman, and if you had, this is not the place for you to work it out."

"Ef I hev no call ter mix in this, doctor, I don't jest so clearly see whar you come in at," was Crockly's growled answer. "You ain't no more reason ter take up fur ther tenderfoot than I hev ter chip in fur Orange. It war this hyer fresh young rooster I war talkin' to, an' mebbe you hed better let him answer fur hisself."

"Don't be excited about me, gentlemen, please don't," interposed Greene. "I do not want to hurt anybody—and I do not want anybody to hurt me. Sometimes people who are strangers do not treat me altogether right, because it is natural to impose on the young and innocent, I suppose. But, after they know me better, they really begin to like me. I can take care of myself, gentlemen, indeed I can."

"Mebbe you have seen a thing like this, afore now. If yer haven't you had better hustle, afore Orange gets around. He's mighty apt to use it; an' it 'pears ter me that he's wakin' up mighty fast."

Crockly had taken a vote on the feeling of the crowd and had come to the conclusion that public sentiment was against him. He didn't like to let go, but he made a change in his tactics.

"I've seen something like it before," replied Greene, looking at the revolver the bad man displayed, "and if there is any tune to be played on the instrument that I don't know it's one that I never heard of; you need not show it to me."

CHAPTER III.

PROVING A LITTLE TOO MUCH.

THE answer of Stephen Greene was a surprise. It was made in such a matter-of-fact way that it did not seem at all like a boast; and if he knew what he was talking about it resembled truth, plain and unadulterated.

There were no signs of any deadly weapons about him; but, that went for nothing. The greater the expert the less sign he is apt to give that his tools are in reach. There might be a whole arsenal of revolvers strung around him, under his loose fitting coat.

Chriss Crockly was one of the few who had doubts. It would be just like the sort of man he had supposed Greene to be to utter such a boast, without the least capacity to back up his assertion. And he had an idea that such vaunting would disgust the men that had been inclined to take the stranger's part. Anyhow, if he was that kind of a man, or professed to be, there was no call for any one to interfere in his behalf. When a man proclaims himself a chief he is supposed to rely on his own hands to protect his head, and the rest of the world stands from under. It encouraged him to keep the fellow in play a little longer. Orange Able would soon be himself again, and would no doubt look out for his interests if he got himself involved in a snarl by endeavoring to hold the tenderfoot where Orange could get at him.

"When a man talks that way in Broad Ax he's gen'rally ready ter back it up with coin, er ther boys run him out. Mebbe you hev coin thet says that same. I ain't much ov a hand meself, but I reckon I could hold yer about level till Orange gits ready ter show yer a copy."

Chriss Crockly changed his tone. He had put up his revolver as he spoke, and drew out a wallet. There seemed to be considerable cash in it, as he flitted it open to show its contents.

"I never ask a man to bet," replied the man with the smile, "on what he is not supposed to know anything about, but I can always be depended on to back my word with all I have. Just now that is not very much; but if one or the other makes it twice as much it will be worth the holding. Mr. Able can talk for himself when he comes around, as he will in a few moments, but there is time enough to give you a lesson if you are bent on it. I suppose, of course, you will allow me to use your revolver, as that will be all in your favor. And you, Doctor Farley, will no doubt oblige me by holding the stakes. You have shown that you were willing to give me fair play, and that is all I ever asked, anywhere."

If anything the voice of the young man had grown a trifle more pleasant; while his smile was just geniality itself, and nothing else. Without any further words he drew from his pocket a wallet that seemed to fairly match that of Chriss Crockly, and placed it in the doctor's hands. Then he nodded to Chriss, as much as to say, do the same.

The doctor was so taken by surprise that he did not object until the pocketbook was fairly in his fingers, and then it appeared to him to be rather late. He waited to see what would be the result of this prompt meeting of Crockly's bluff. He did not believe that rather cautious ruffian would risk his money when he found the stranger so ready to cover it.

Crockly, however, was really a good shot;

perhaps the second or third best in the town. The laugh that arose as he hesitated had its effect. Orange was sitting up, looking around him in a dazed, but vigorous manner. If he took water now it might be some time before he heard the last of it. He made up his mind in a moment.

"Doc Farley is good ernuf fur me, if he's willin' ter hold ther ducats; an' thar's my leetle pile—mine tell a better man than me takes it at ther p'int ov ther pistol. An' he kin set ther copy, ez it's him thet's doin' ther blowin'. When he gits thar he'll find Chriss Crockly right on top, in another minnit."

Chriss meant all that he said, just then; and the wallet would have been in the doctor's hands along with that of Stephen Greene, in another instant, if there had not been an interruption.

Orange Able had risen to his feet and staggered toward his friend.

"Hold on there, Chriss, hold on!" he mumbled in the ear of his follower. "Drop that. You can't hold a candle to the sport, and I ain't sure that I can do it myself. I begin to see who he is. I have heard of him before, and I don't see why I didn't catch on sooner. It's 'The Sharp with a Smile,' and he is a bad man to fool with. He *always* wins."

"But you ain't goin' ter throw up yer cards, an' let him take ther pile?" asked Chriss, in amazement at the way in which his chief had taken water.

"Just for the present. There is no use laying for him unless you have the drop, and mean to pull when he looks your way. Broad Ax wouldn't stand that this time in the day, and we have to wait."

"All right. You're runnin' ther biz. I war jest a-holdin' him tell you come 'round ter say how things orter go. I kin take a hitch at him some time when ther hain't quite so much backin' about. I ain't hard ter please when you say so."

Then he turned to the doctor, meantime carefully returning his wallet to his pocket.

"Sorry, Doc, an' you gents all, what's lookin' fur fun. I wouldn't mind puttin' my wealth on it, but Orange, here, says it's time ter go home. Reckon he hes ther headache, an' he wants me ter take keer ov him. Any how it would be crowdin' ther mourners ter ask this gent ter shoot fur coin, an' him jest in frum a trip in Long Pete's hearse, which ther same's ernuf ter shake ther nerves ov a cast-iron monkey. We won't crowd him now; but I'll see him later, an' ef he thinks he kin shoot fur coin it won't be hard fur him ter git a chance ter show that he ain't bin a-blowin'. So long, gents—an' it won't be healthy fur ther man that makes ary side remarks. He'll be mighty apt ter hear from headquarters."

And with this parting threat Chriss swaggered away, with Orange Able's hand tucked under his arm, never once looking back to see how his departure was taken.

"Perhaps it is just as well that the matter ended so, young man," said the doctor, as he returned Greene's money. "They are a bad lot, all of them; and whether you beat or were beaten in a trial of skill such as you proposed, the result would have been about the same as far as you were concerned. Sooner or later they would have found means to have made it warm for you. If you will take my advice you will give Orange Able and the men that train with him a wide berth, even if you can shoot. If you can't I would advise that you get out of town as soon as possible. After what you have said and done, if you remain here, the time will soon come when you must be a past master with the pistol or else go under."

"Really, doctor, I am much obliged to you for your warning, but it is a fortunate thing that I am a man of peace, and duly grateful for all your kindness. Don't it strike you that you are hinting, just a little perhaps, but still hinting, that I am not talking in the strict lines of truth? If I can shoot? Really, I thought I had said I *could* shoot."

Then Stephen Greene looked inquiringly at the doctor as if waiting for an explanation, or perhaps an apology.

The doctor took the matter quite pleasantly. The words of the young man were not uttered in either a boastful or an angry tone; but rather as a softly breathed regret, and so they might be listened to without taking offense.

"Oh, I am sorry if I hurt your feelings, for I did not intend at all to throw any doubt on your veracity. That is something we never do in Broad Ax unless we have some object in view. This much I will say; I did not think anything in the world would keep me standing out here discussing such questions when supper is ready and waiting. Perhaps we had better adjourn this meeting until a more convenient season."

Greene bowed gravely, but did not seem altogether satisfied.

"If you could only give me a moment or so, until I could convince you. You have treated me so well—better than I deserved, even—that I cannot bear to have a doubt on your mind. Does this look like bragging?"

He held out a ten-dollar gold piece in his hand, to show what it was. Then he cast it straight up in the air. While it twirled over their heads, a scarcely visible speck in the grow-

ing dusk of the evening, he made a motion that was so quick it was hardly seen; threw up his hand; pulled the trigger of a derringer which he had caught from some hidden receptacle; and then, as rapidly, dropped the weapon out of sight again.

The shot would not have been so wonderful if he had been standing at a ready; but the swiftness with which he had drawn and fired was what made it miraculous. The coin went swirling up again.

The crowd then saw that something had happened that was not down on the bills.

The doctor threw up his hands and fell as though he had been stricken with a club.

Farley had been standing a little off by himself. The distance of several yards separated him from every one else, so that he could not have been touched by any one near him, and there was only the crack of the one pistol heard. Nine-tenths of those present who saw him fall were certain that he had dropped to Stephen Greene's derringer.

For a moment every one stood as if thunder-struck. That such a thing should be done, without cause or warning, was almost beyond the bounds of belief.

Then there was a roar from the crowd, that surged forward in two sections, one of which threw itself upon the stranger, while the other surrounded the prostrate man. Nina was already at the side of her father, holding his head in her lap; and on the top of his forehead there was a little red smutch, showing where the shot had struck him.

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN CROSSEYE MISSES AN APPOINTMENT.

BROAD AX was a brisk little town, and rapidly growing. It professed to be a live place, with all the trimmings that belonged to a thriving young emporium.

Among other things it had the customary line of road-agents.

They had been operating with considerable success for some time, and it was but seldom they appeared on the carpet without making a comfortable haul. Either their leader was a very shrewd, or a very lucky man, though it was generally believed that he had secret sources of information about the travel. When he struck it was always to find some one on board of the stage with a rich booty in his possession. When the result would have only been a wind-haul Captain Crosseye did not appear upon the carpet.

The brigand captain—who had received his appellation from a certain irregularity in his optics—had begun his operations shortly before Doctor Farley went East to bring his daughter to Broad Ax. At that time the work of the bandit had not attracted special attention, and the doctor had scarcely given him a second thought. He would not have known of the danger he was likely to find in his path as he returned, had it not been for a correspondent of his, one Ira Wickfield, who had warned him not to bring much coin back with him, since it would certainly make him a special mark for the man of the cross-eyes.

Unfortunately the warning was received by the doctor just as he was starting on his return journey, and was not fully digested until he was nearing Broad Ax, and it was too late to change his plans. He had several thousand dollars in his grip-sack, and his daughter's safety to look after, as well as his own. The latter part of the ride had been doubly uncomfortable on that account, and the presence of Orange Able, as a possible protection, had not been quite so distasteful as it otherwise would have been.

It is true that they got into town without seeing anything of Captain Crosseye; but the doctor did not know how near a thing he had of it.

Without any particular reason Long Pete, the driver, had chosen to alter the route he had been taking for some weeks past, and as he had not said a word about doing it to a living soul, small blame was it to Captain Crosseye's men that they waited in vain at the regular crossing, while the stage rolled through the "old ford," half a mile further up Black Run, which Pete had decided was passable on account of low water, and which saved him a few hundred rods near the end of the journey.

As Long Pete was generally on time the ambuscaders did not have to wait more than half an hour to understand that there was a mistake somewhere in their calculations.

The result was, not a panic but a cautious retreat. Crosseye's men always were cautious, except when they were in action. Then they were bold as lions; but, afterward, the earth seemed to swallow them up. They vanished and left no trail.

In this case a man whose face was masked, and who held a carbine at a ready, rode out into the trail, and looked up and down the road, stopping a moment to listen. Then he turned back into the bushes, said a few words to four or five other men lurking there, who were armed and equipped after the same manner. There was no answer; but quickly, though cautiously, the entire party moved off up the stream, keeping on the further side.

When they were fairly beyond possible sight or sound there was a sigh of relief, and a man, who was evidently not a road-agent, stepped out from the other side of the trail, at a point a little higher up the road. He carried a Winchester in the hollow of his arm, the hammer of which was back, and his finger was on the trigger. He also had a belt around his waist, to support a pair of revolvers that swung at his hips; and in addition he carried a bowie-knife of very respectable length. He peered into the net of mesquites where the outlaws had disappeared, to catch the sounds of returning footsteps, if there were any; and seemed very well satisfied that, after the lapse of a minute or so, he heard none.

"They are certainly gone," murmured this individual to himself. "It is probably better so, though a man who is a fair shot, in an ambuscade like that, ought to make it very uncomfortable for even half a dozen men, who are not at all anxious to fight when the advantage of position is against them. I think I should have slaughtered one or two upon their opening hostilities; and the rest would probably have taken their dead and badly wounded, and retired. Really, it was not a half bad scheme, yet it might have failed. Yes, I think it is better so. But, I wonder if anything can have happened to Pete and his cargo? They should have passed some time ago. And I wonder if the doctor and the divine Nina are, or were, on board? Since I had no opportunity to appear in the guise of a hero I suppose I may as well keep this adventure to myself. I may tell it to the doctor himself, some time, but I am not sure even of that. I did nothing but march out and then march back again, and it might seem somewhat ridiculous to the young lady. Ah!"

The exclamation was caused by the discovery that he was not alone. Another man had come out from the mesquites, on the same side of the road, only a little higher still, and was moving toward him.

If this party had appeared sooner it is possible that he would have been greeted with a portion of the contents of the carbine, that, as it was, came half way up to an aim, in haste.

A second glance, however, was enough to show that the new-comer had not at all the air or appearance of a desperado. He stepped out in a hesitating, timorous way, looked back over his shoulder, on either side of the trail and held up his hand with a gesture that was intended for a caution. Then, he came forward on tip-toe.

"Sh-h-h!" he said, in a whisper. "I—I think they are gone, but, there is no certainty about the movements of such wretches. How—how fortunate it was that we were able to find cover in time! And—and if they had ever thought of examining the bushes, how horrible, horrible, it would have been! I actually trembled for you when I saw that ruffian come into the road. I—I thought that he had discovered you."

"And who are you?" asked the other, somewhat sharply. He was not altogether pleased with the address of this stranger, which threw a doubt on both his courage and his capacity. He seemed actually to think that he had been hiding.

"I—I am a non-combatant, to express the most important item first. I have been taking a view of the natural surroundings of the town which lies in the distance, and find that it is well worth the study of a man who delights in nature and her works and ways. Were it not for the beastly ruffians of whom we have heard so much, and whom we have undoubtedly just seen, I should certainly remain here a few months. I have not yet, in the course of my travels, met with a more interesting spot for aboriginal research, or one likely to be richer in archaeological results if properly explored."

The spasm of fear into which the appearance of the road-agents had cast this gentleman was evidently passing away. His voice was still husky, but that seemed to be natural, or at least habitual. As he went on he showed considerable enthusiasm, and he would have branched out into a dissertation of what appeared, even on such short acquaintance, to be his hobby, if he had not been stopped.

"My dear sir, I have not time to remain here, discussing the antiquities of Broad Ax, in which I do not think any one but yourself is very deeply interested. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Ira Wickfield, a citizen of Broad Ax, in which town I am engaged in business, with fair success. Although I am not pugnacious by nature, I came out expressly to meet these road-agents, in case they made an appearance and attacked the stage which is due here about this hour. I begin to suspect that the vehicle has taken the other route, and has escaped them altogether. For this I am truly thankful. Though I had deliberately ambushed myself there, it was not with a desire to take human life, but, if necessary, to protect my friends, whom I expected to arrive by the coach. I see by your appearance that you are a stranger and a student. I shall be happy to show you any attention that may be desirable, and shall be glad to accompany you back to Broad Ax, where, I infer, you are stopping."

Then Mr. Wickfield drew from his pocket a card, on which was printed:

"IRA WICKFIELD,
HATS, CAPS, BOOTS AND SHOES.

A general assortment of Dry Goods, Drugs and Chemicals. Call on him at the Regulator, Broad Ax. He will furnish you with anything that you may want."

The stranger received the card with a courteous bow, looked it over, adjusted his spectacles and looked it over again.

"With anything I may want. Ah, Probably. Perhaps. One is apt to want a great deal in this country, since it is necessary to travel with a limited amount of baggage. Allow me."

Very gravely he produced his wallet, and from a number there selected a card, which he passed over to Wickfield.

"SIMON LEVANT,

Late Surgeon of the U. S. Navy."

That was what Ira Wickfield read; and it only satisfied him that the opinion he had formed on a second, and more careful survey, had been a correct one.

"Glad to meet you, doctor, very glad. You will consider the circumstances and pardon my abruptness on your first appearance. As we go along toward the town I can explain more fully the reasons for my being here. It is a little strange I did not see you before, but, after I had hidden myself I only had eyes for the road-agents."

The doctor dropped in alongside of the store-keeper, and the two walked off amicably together, Levant explaining that he had strolled out from Broad Ax, and gone much further than he intended. Hearing the sounds made by approaching horsemen, and having heard much of Captain Crosseye and his gang during his brief stay in the town, he had taken to the bushes without waiting to see who it was that came. And very fortunate did he consider himself when he saw that the party did the same, and evidently with an evil intent.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNEXPECTED APPEARANCE.

"AND so," the doctor finally added, "you came out to meet these ruffians for the sake of your friend? Brave man! The days of Damon and Pythias have come again. Would that I might be added to the list of those for whom some one is willing to die. In the heat of battle such things, I grant you, have been frequently done—I myself have seen such cases—but in cool deliberation, after walking a mile or more to reach the spot—oh, it is a wonderful thing."

Doctor Levant was reflective in his speech. He did not seem to be speaking to his companion so much as to himself; and Ira Wickfield, hearing, was too conscientious to allow him to be so far off of the truth.

"Don't make me blush, my dear sir. I am afraid the dearest friend I have would be allowed to look after himself and his property before I would go out to face such a fire-eater as Captain Crosseye. But you know there is something more than a friend, or rather than friendship. There is the feeling inspired by lovely woman, for instance. That can nerve an arm, even as weak and unused to doughty deeds as mine, to perform prodigies of valor. It has been the moving cause of all great deeds since the world began."

"Including the eating of the unfortunate apple—um—the tree and its forbidden fruit." There is generally a lady in the case, as our French philosophers say when they meet with what is otherwise a mystery; and they look for her. In my own case I am free to admit that I would prefer to defer the interview if it was to be consequent upon another with a gentleman of the style of Captain Crosseye. Have you been separated long?"

"Really," answered Ira, a trifle abashed, "I should perhaps have been more definite in my first statement, since the fact is that as yet we have never met. As a comparative stranger it does not seem as if I should have mentioned the matter at all, but under the circumstances, and having begun, it is more delicate to explain than to leave you under a false impression. The father of the young lady to whom I have referred is an old friend of mine, though a number of years my senior. He has been absent in the East, for some time, and is now on his way home, bringing his daughter with him. I expected him by this stage. I have been corresponding with the young lady for some time, and though nothing of a sentimental nature has passed between us, I will say in strict confidence, that it is with the permission of Miss Nina's father, who, I more than fancy, would be pleased if something were to come of it."

"Miss Nina, did you say? A favorite name of mine. I knew a Miss—ah, a Senorita Nina. Pardon the interruption. The name struck me so forcibly, it is such an uncommon one, that I spoke without intending it."

"There is really nothing to pardon. I should be pleased to introduce you to Doctor Farley.

No doubt you could meet on professional grounds, and be highly interested in each other. He is the best man in the world, and adores his daughter. I do not think that he would have thought of bringing her to such a place as Broad Ax, for the present, had it not been that he was afraid that she might become involved with some one that was not exactly what he would wish for a son-in-law. Indeed, there was a young man mentioned in her letters who was really particularly objectionable. A man from the West, too; a young fellow named Morton Blackburn, with nothing but an unlimited amount of cheek to recommend him. The doctor met him once; and, I suspect, hastened his own movements until they almost looked like a flight, and all, no doubt, without any due cause. The young lady had no idea of anything serious. But there; I have unburdened my soul to some one, and you will pardon me. I know it cannot interest you to tell you the affairs of utter strangers. Perhaps it has been because you looked as though you rather wished to repel than invite confidence, that I have done so."

"Say nothing at all about it. I assure you that I have found your confidence very—very interesting. And so they were expected to-night. Do you think that any accident has befallen them? From what you have said the stage is long overdue at this point."

"There is no doubt but that the driver has chanced to try the other ford. They are probably safely in Broad Ax by this time, and Miss Nina by the bedside of her aunt, who has been suffering for some days from a slight sprain of her ankle."

"Ah, her aunt, you say?"

"Yes, the doctor's sister; a very estimable lady, somewhat her brother's junior, who has been boarding with him at the Western Continent, though now they will all live together in a pleasant little residence that he has had furnished. It will be a delightful variation in Broad Ax society to have such an addition as Miss Nina, and a hospitable house like Doctor Farley's. There are only a few of us to be benefited by it, but that will make it the more valued."

"No doubt, yes," responded Doctor Levant, somewhat abstractedly, and with his eyes fixed in the direction of the town, which was now near at hand.

"But, does it not seem as though there was some excitement in Broad Ax—something not altogether in the ordinary course of events? I hope nothing has happened to the stage, after all."

The front of the Western Continent was in view, and they could see the crowd surging in that direction, and hear the angry roar, now that their attention was directed that way. When they came nearer—and they came at a run—they could see that the crowd was not all of one mind, for one enthusiastic individual who was bringing up a rope in triumph, was knocked endways by another enthusiastic citizen, who did not think there was any call for its production. In another moment they had learned that Doctor Farley had been shot, and perhaps killed; though as he had been carried into the house, and every one but the lucky bearers barred out, it was not certain what was the exact extent of the injury.

"Follow me," said Wickfield, speaking firmly to Levant. "Perhaps it is a case where your professional services may be the salvation of my friend."

Then he pushed past John Johnson, who was standing on guard at the door, and taking Levant with him, found his way to the room that he knew was the doctor's.

Once fairly within the doorway and their appearance was greeted with a cry of delight from the lady, who turned sharply toward them at their coming.

"Ah, I knew Mr. Wickfield, that you had not deserted us in our hour of greatest need! You come like a blessing, like a benediction; but, oh, why were you not here sooner? What precious moments may not have been lost—perhaps the precious life of my poor brother along with them. Oh, can no one find Doctor Stout? He has been sent for again and again, but in vain."

Doctor Stout was the rival, professionally, of Doctor Farley; but as Broad Ax could hardly ever find him when wanted, and when found he was still less often sober, he was seldom taken as a Hobson's choice. Yet, if sober he was really a tolerably skillful man, and it was at Farley's whispered request that he had been sent for in this case.

"Ah, Miss Hilgarda, you must pardon me. If I had come sooner I could not have brought this gentleman with me. Think no more of Doctor Stout. This is Doctor Levant, late of the United States service. In his hands your brother may be certain of all that science can suggest, or knowledge propose. Doctor, you can take charge of the case; and I trust that you will not find it as serious—though of course I have every confidence in your powers—as we had been led to believe."

To the unprofessional eye of Ira Wickfield, things looked encouraging, and escaping from the lady who had placed herself fairly in the

way while she uttered her plaint, and unmindful of the cry of joy with which she received his announcement, he pushed on to the bedside of Farley, who raised up and stretched out his hand with a smile.

"My daughter, Nina, Wickfield. Thank Heaven that I am able to place her in your hands before I die. Nina, this is my friend, Ira Wickfield, the best friend man ever had. Twice he saved my life. One day he will prove just as good a friend to you. Be guided by him, and all will be right. He knows how everything is, and can arrange all to the best advantage. It is about over, Wickfield. The end must come soon. I am watching the case professionally, and can see that I am sinking fast."

Ira acknowledged the introduction by a nod. He was really too much concerned for his friend; especially after hearing his doleful prognostications.

"You are as good as a dozen dead men yet; or live ones either."

"There was one chance for me, perhaps, if that infernal fraud, Stout, could have been found in time, and had been sober enough to perform the operation Hilgarda herself was going to undertake it, but it is too delicate for her, too delicate. I am going fast."

For a man that was going fast the doctor's voice, when he spoke about Stout, was unnecessarily strong.

Wickfield did not notice that. He had an idea that Doctor Farley ought to be able to give as good an opinion about himself as about any other man.

"My dear old friend, don't give up, I beg of you. I bring with me Doctor Simon Levant, late of the navy. If there is anything within the range of science that can be done for you, speak to him of it and it will be done. Perhaps you know him already."

At the introduction Levant stepped forward. He had been quietly standing a little back from the bed, listening to the conversation of the two friends, and looking attentively at Farley.

The latter looked up with a start, and returned the gaze with interest. Gradually his face brightened, and as he held up his hand there was a more hopeful ring in his voice.

"I cannot say that I ever met Levant before, but his reputation for skill and learning are well known to me, and I read his work on the Bacterian Theory of Disease with a great deal of interest and profit. I am proud to meet him in Broad Ax, and I am more than pleased to have his skillful services at the critical point of my whole life. It gives me renewed hope. To work, doctor, to work, if you wish to save me."

Levant clasped the hand of his patient, and then transferred his grasp to the wrist that was held up for him to take.

"I was not aware that my reputation had penetrated to this out of the way place, whither I came more for rest and quiet than anything else. Of course you have some theory, doctor. What is it? I am not above a hint in such a case as this, where the patient is in full possession of his faculties."

"And I believe that you are right, Levant. I am dying from exhaustion, and there is nothing left for me to rely on but transfusion. My daughter has offered her veins to supply new vigor to the waning powers of her father, but, knowing the delicacy of the operation I was in despair. Hilgarda, under my direction, was my last resort, but you can see how little hope, and how much of chance there would be in that. With you here it all will go well, and if I have not passed beyond the limits of endurance already I shall yet recover. To work, then, for the time for it is but brief."

"It may be as you say, though I believe the case is not hopeless without it. You have all the—appurtenances of the—operation?"

"Everything is prepared. You will find my office in the next room, with everything convenient."

"Then allow me to speak a moment beforehand with your daughter. You are aware that everything may depend upon her."

"Yes, yes. Haste. She will attend you."

Dr. Levant peered inquiringly through his spectacles at Nina, who gravely nodded, and when he turned to the door, followed him without hesitation. Ira Wickfield and Hilgarda remained by the bedside of the patient, and scarcely noticed their departure.

In the little room that the doctor used as an office when in the hotel—though he had a small building that was generally his headquarters in business hours—Dr. Levant paused, took Miss Nina by the hand, and without saying a word gazed steadily into her face.

The action puzzled the young lady a little, though she supposed that it was to see if she was cool enough and steady enough to hear what was to follow. At any rate she returned the gaze with interest. The appearance of the doctor had somehow altered a little, much to her surprise. He did not appear quite so old; the stoop had gone out of his shoulders, and when he finally removed his spectacles, and a smile crept into his face in spite of himself, she started back in amazement, exclaiming in a low, yet thrilling tone:

"Mort Blackburn, can it be you?"

CHAPTER VI.

DR. FARLEY'S IDEA OF CONVALESCENCE.

"MORT BLACKBURN it is," answered the supposed Dr. Levant, replacing his spectacles, and otherwise returning to the appearance of the middle-aged savant.

"My coming is no doubt a surprise to you as much as to myself, but it seems to have been a fortunate chance that led me here at this time. Your father has really received a more serious injury than the average practitioner would perhaps admit. I am going to give all my attention to him in the first place. Afterward I will explain everything. I will say, though, that I assumed this disguise for the purpose of making his acquaintance. I wished him to meet me under such circumstances that all his prejudices would not be arrayed against me."

"But, good heavens! Do you mean to trifle with his life? Can you imagine that I would allow such villainy to go on? Do you insult me by supposing that I am altogether heartless? What have you ever seen in me during the brief period of our acquaintance that would justify you in your villainy?"

Miss Nina was indignant, and she spoke strongly. She drew herself up as she concluded her brief arraignment, cast at him a look full of scorn, and was about to leave the room. As for the young man—for young he certainly was, in spite of his looks—he felt that all would be lost unless he moved promptly.

Hurriedly he placed himself between Nina and the door.

"Listen to me before you condemn me. As Heaven is my judge I would never have thought of intruding at such a moment if Ira Wickfield had not brought me. I could not refuse without giving away the secret of my disguise. I can be of service in this emergency, and I know what I am talking of. I have had experience enough to fit me to take charge of the case until some more reputable physician than this Doctor Stout of whom they have been speaking can be called in. Only trust me and I will do all that can be done for the present, or until the real nature and extent of his injury shall have developed. I need hardly swear to you that the person of your father would be sacred if intrusted to my hands, and that I would not trifle with his life or health. Only believe in me, keep my secret, and wait. Everything will come right in the end."

His tone was so earnest, his manner so assured, that Nina was almost convinced. She began to think that it might be the truth he was telling her and hoped that it was.

"But do you intend to attempt the operation of which he speaks—which he says, indeed, is the only chance to save his life?"

"His life is in no danger whatever, I verily believe; I wish I could say as much for his mind. He has received a brain shock, that may or may not produce a serious result; but there is no call for transfusion, on any such grounds as he gives. There is no call to dilute the blood in his veins; and if there was, a chemical solution would answer the purpose better. At least so I shall tell him, and if he has kept up with the latest developments of science, as I suppose he has, he will probably agree with me. I should have spoken of it to him in the outset, but I was afraid that you might recognize me in spite of my disguise, and say something that would bring about an explosion. If anything should start your father on the opposite tack he might be a raving maniac, that a dozen men could not hold. I assure you, his physical strength is entirely unimpaired."

"But his mind? Can you assure me that it will not be permanently injured?"

"I think I can. There is no depression of the skull that is perceptible; and, as I said before, I think it is only a shock, that will wear off. Meantime, he is liable to take almost any queer notion, and the best surgeon in the world could do no more than I will do if you will allow me to aid you. The most important thing to do is to get him to sleep. Though I do not believe in an injudicious use of morphine, here a hypodermic injection is about the thing to employ. In the guise of pseudo-transfusion he will take to it kindly, and when he awakens we will know more about what the result is going to be. I trust he will waken with his wits all about him; and perhaps forgetting all the occurrences of the evening."

"I am inclined to trust you, because you do not promise too much. And yet, I hardly know. Are you deceiving me, or are you telling the truth? I had no idea that you knew anything about such matters."

"My dear Nina," he said, taking in his own the hands which she had placed tightly over her eyes, as if to shut out everything else while she thought. "What possible object could I have? When you found me out, as you assuredly would, you would consider me almost beneath your hate, and I could never look you in the face again. It is because I understand so well the uncertainty of all things that I do not promise more. I will do all that can be done, and I have no real apprehensions."

She drew herself away from him, but not abruptly.

"Let us go back, then. There is no time to

ask you for further explanation. If all goes well— I will see you again."

"A moment. I must arm myself with some of the paraphernalia of the profession."

In a way that showed some acquaintance with such things, he rummaged around, for a moment or two, and then was ready. Together the two returned to Doctor Farley, who was anxiously awaiting them.

It is not worth while to give the conversation that followed, since it has already been sufficiently outlined. Nina watched in fear and trembling; Ira Wickfield in enthusiastic delight; and Hilgarda after her own peculiar style of doing everything. Certainly, there never was such a man as this same Doctor Levant, and Providence seemed to have surely sent him to their aid, when they were in such despair at having no one to trust in but the trustless and bibulous Doctor Stout. His tongue, and the morphine both worked to a charm, and after a little Doctor Farley slept.

Then Levant made a motion, and they all followed him on tip-toe, out of the room.

"I think," said he, "that Miss Nina had—had—better take some refreshment, and then lie down on the sofa that I see in her father's room, so as to be with him when he wakes. I am free to confess that—that I begin to feel the necessity of attending to the inner man, myself. I shall be in my room, and if I am needed shall be ready to come at any time. Of course I shall look in later, but after the perfect success of the—the operation it might be injudicious to run the chance of disturbing him by calling him too soon. In the absence of Miss Nina, Miss Hilgarda will remain on duty. Of course I need not caution her that the most profound silence is to be observed. In case he should awaken, which I do not think is likely to happen, please refuse to converse with him about anything but his daughter; or, perhaps, in regard to the injury I have understood that you had the misfortune to meet with. It will interest him, and keep his mind away from other, and more dangerous subjects."

At first Miss Nina refused to leave her father, but as Wickfield and Hilgarda both supported the order, she finally consented, and reluctantly went to the dining-room.

Once there she found that her appetite had only been slumbering. It was awake now, and she had more confidence in the physician in charge since she saw how exactly he could diagnose her own case.

Still, she hardly glanced at him, and offered no remarks, though they sat near to each other, at the long table, which was now deserted by every one else.

The elder Miss Farley had forgotten all about her sprain until she heard it mentioned. She knew then that she blushed, and hoped that the others did not notice the fact. When she started to go back the pain seemed to be about four times as great as it had ever been before; and it was with some difficulty that she managed to hobble into the room. She thought it quite likely that she herself would probably soon be a patient on the stranger's hands, if Doctor Farley did not soon recover sufficiently to prescribe for her. And just at present it seemed to her that she would rather trust to the ministrations of Levant. There was something interesting about him, that attracted her attention, outside of his abilities as a surgeon and physician.

"Really, I cannot understand it. He is not young, he is not handsome; but, somehow, he is so romantic," she murmured to herself, as she sunk softly into a chair by the bedside of the sleeper. "I almost feel like making him my father confessor, even at this short acquaintance. Perhaps I may be forced to do so yet. Ira would no doubt be blinded by his friendship, and would refuse to listen to me even if I should dare to muster sufficient courage to speak to him. Oh, dear, when one is environed by mystery, and perhaps by crime, how the heart yearns for some one in whom to confide!"

Miss Hilgarda was no longer what might in strictness be called young; but she could not be called old; and she had decidedly a youthful heart. She had been mistaken in her time for the daughter of the doctor, a good deal to his amusement, and no doubt to her delight. There was a deep current of romance running through her nature. As she sat there watching the patient, she forgot all about the pain that had for a season given her more than annoyance, and fell to thinking so deeply on other subjects, that the noiseless entrance of Nina scarcely aroused her from her reverie.

Together the two sat, for some hours, without a word being spoken. They were still comparative strangers, and the situation did not admit of much conversation.

Then the figure on the bed moved uneasily, there was a yawn or two, and Doctor Farley was awake.

"Well, I declare!" he exclaimed, as he rose to a sitting posture. "I must have been tired. See that I have turned in with my clothes on, and had a royal old nap. And, hello! Had a bump, did I? Had forgotten all about it. Pete was doing some of his fancy driving, and had a spill, did he? Well, I'm all right, and glad to

see that you two are getting acquainted. Gad! it was not a half bad idea to bring you home, puss! I don't see how I managed to exist without you. Well, you and Hilgarda can go on with the confidential discourse that I know you are dying to have, and I'll put down a mite of supper, and then look around town and see how the boys are coming on. I have been away so long, that I am dying to hear the news. Get out of here, both of you, while I arrange my toilet."

The doctor was very much awake, now, and seemed not only to have forgotten all about the transfusion crotchet, but to have regained his strength entirely. As he spoke he made a movement to arise, and the ladies obeyed his orders without delay. They were uncertain what else to do, and Nina was in haste to get the advice of the surgeon in charge.

While there did not seem to be anything of insanity or delirium about Doctor Farley, there was a change in him that both startled and perplexed his daughter. It was very much as though the weight of a dozen years or more had been mysteriously rolled off of his shoulders, and he had become a different man, and again young.

"It appears to me that I have been having a mighty dull time of it lately," he thought to himself, when left alone. "I don't remember to have been on a racket for the last quarter of a century. I look like a deacon of the last century, and I haven't a decent suit of clothes to my name. Everything is 'customary suits of solemn black.' I'll see to that in the morning, if I live long enough. Now that Nina has come I must make things a little more lively. Here seems to be something a little nearer the thing. I'll try it anyway."

The doctor proceeded to array himself in the nearest approach to a flashy suit that he could find, belted on a pair of revolvers, and started out for a night with the boys.

CHAPTER VII.

THE STORM BEGINS TO MUTTER.

In the hall the doctor met his daughter. It was no wonder that as he came suddenly on her, and had his arms around her waist and his lips on her cheek before she was aware of his presence, that she did not at once recognize him, but uttered a startled little scream, that fortunately attracted no attention.

Farley laughed gayly.

"Don't be excited, puss. It is only your old father. I have been a good boy so long that now I have you safely here, secure from all marauders who had an eye to my parental preserves, I am going to give myself a little line, and in a mild sort of way make a night of it. Don't sit up for me. When you get tired talking to Hilgarda go to bed and get a good night's rest. I should have thought that you would have been there by this time, anyhow. Good-night. I'll see you in the morning."

The doctor strode off with a merry whistle, leaving his daughter to stare after him in dismay. This was a development that she had not expected. She had never seen him in such guise before, and if she had met him anywhere else she would not have known him.

Nina had already spoken to Levant, as he had better be called, when in the garb of the doctor, and he had somewhat reassured her, telling her that this was no more than he had warned her to expect. For a time her father would not act quite like himself, but in the end would sober down into his original self. He promised to look in in a moment, and told her to meantime try and detain him if he showed a desire to wander away.

Neither of them had calculated on the promptness of the doctor's movements, and when the time came to act, Nina was so surprised that she let her father slip out of her fingers without an effort. It is most likely that she could not have detained him if she had tried.

If the doctor had led a quiet, retired, and strictly business sort of life since settling in Broad Ax he had been keeping his eyes open, and knew the run of the town as well as any of the boys. He went off down the street with no uncertain step. So changed was he in general manner and appearance that the few persons he happened to meet did not recognize him, and he dropped into the Happy Home Saloon without leaving any trail behind him. The moments after that lengthened into hours, and still he did not come out.

Meantime, in certain other parts of the town there was still some excitement in regard to the mysterious way in which the doctor had been shot down, and instead of being in a moribund condition it was gradually rising. Although a number of anxious inquirers had been assured by Johnson that the wounded man was doing as well as could be expected, and would be out on the street the next day, somehow the intelligence was not altogether credited. As they expressed their doubts louder than they did their statement of the landlord it finally turned out that about half the people in the town came to believe that Dr. Farley was still in a comatose condition, and with strong prospects of dying before morning.

As yet the affair was shrouded in considerable

mystery. There were various surmises, and but little certainty. Farley was popular, and there was a general feeling of indignation, with a desire to punish the perpetrator of the crime, if crime it was.

But, who was the guilty man?

It is true that at the first outbreak, immediately after the doctor fell, there was a strong feeling that the stranger who answered to the name of Stephen Greene had dropped him, for some reasons unknown. If he had not been cool as an icicle, and the luck running in his favor, it is most likely that he would have been lynched on the spot.

But, there were some who had been watching Greene intently, who were certain that he fired but one shot, and that at the coin he had flung into the air. They were so confident in their assertions, that when the coin was found, molded neatly into a little cup, and the flattened bullet not far from it, the case seemed to be settled as far as the smiling stranger was concerned. He was allowed to retire, which he did in good order, after taking a look at the man who was just being carried into the hotel.

There were others who had their suspicions directed in a different way, and it was fortunate for Orange Able that more than one eye had been on him as he strolled away. The charge was not made against him quite so openly as it had been against Greene, but for a time there was a strong current in his direction. He had gone away after having had some trouble with the doctor, and every one had been surprised to see him go. It would have been just like the man to have turned in the distance and taken a snap shot at the man to whom he had apparently knuckled. To be sure, it would have been more reasonable to suppose that his shot would be directed at the stranger, who had knocked him down; but then perhaps it was, and missed its mark, striking the doctor by mistake. Fortunately for him, he was not the kind of a man that any one wanted to approach unless there was a case against him clear enough to justify the array of corpses that would likely be awaiting burial when the affair was over, and so his friends had the chance to clear his skirts. As for Orange, he looked back over his shoulder at the noise that followed the shot, but never halted. He guessed closely at what had happened, but waited for particulars until one of the crowd followed him into the saloon which he generally made his headquarters, and which was known as "The Garland."

Orange listened with interest to the description, and smiled grimly when he heard that some had dared to credit him with the deed.

"Funny sorter thing, ain't it?" asked Crockly, looking closely at his chief, to see how he received the intelligence.

"There's somebody back in ther bushes, an' don't ye furgit it. That shot wern't fired fur fun. But, who's bin layin' fur Farley? I'll swar I didn't know thar was a man in Broad Ax had anything in fur him. It would be blamed unbandy fur him ter know it. Stout's a stick, even when he ain't got a jag on, an' thar's a chance fur any man ter hev ter come to him. I wouldn't want him settin' my bones ef I tho't he knew I bed bin layin' out fur him."

"Don't be a fool, Chriss," was the surly answer.

"If you have no eyes or head of your own, take these of a man that has. The sharp that came in on the stage did the trick, only he did it so neatly that these fellows could not catch on to the racket, and how he worked it. They will find out by and by; and then the howl will begin again. I shouldn't wonder if it would be unhealthy for that young man if he stays over the night in Broad Ax. By midnight the men that know how the doctor came to drop will be three to one that don't, and if Farley climbs the golden stairs, or looks like going, there will be a hanging bee, sure. Keep your eyes open and you will see it will be just as I tell you."

For the time being that closed the conversation. Orange Able was not in so bad a humor that he had lost his appetite, and he went away to get his supper. What he had said had been heard by more than one of the bystanders, and the seed was accordingly sown that Orange hoped would bring forth good fruit.

It certainly did, in the sense that Able would have had it understood. It reawakened the suspicions that were almost dead, and though there were plenty who believed that the thing was an accident, however it happened, there was a general feeling among them that Stephen Greene had something to do with the accident.

Toward midnight a report started, no one knew how, that Doctor Farley was dead. It spread from one saloon to another, until it was known all over the town, save at the Happy Home. That it was not heard of there was most likely owing to the fact that Orange Able and his friends generally gave that place a wide berth. Its frequenters were not their style at all.

"What did I tell you?" exclaimed Able, when the rumor was first heard at The Garland.

"If Broad Ax is the place I think it is—and I ought to know it pretty well—there will be music in the air. It's two to one that the gay young rooster has skipped the town; but if he

hasn't, I guess the town knows what to do with him."

That was about all he said; but if there had been some shrewd man watching, he might have observed that there was a good deal of low talk being done by a few men who looked very much in earnest. Whisky was plenty, too. Before long there was a movement on foot that seemed to be spontaneous, and if the men who were the ostensible leaders had been told that they were being led in turn by Orange Able and his tools, they would have laughed in scorn at the idea. The tide was rising, and no one saw the pressure that was behind it. There was a general inquiry as to what had become of Stephen Greene. Then some one said that he was out and around the town, and that he had been seen to go into the Happy Home saloon early in the evening. As he had not made his appearance anywhere else, he was probably there yet.

After that came a rush in that direction, starting at apparently the same minute, from several of the other saloons. Cursing, howling, with no clear idea of what they were going to do, but bent on finding the young man, the crowd streamed down the street, and finally halted in front of the Happy Home.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN INTERRUPTED GAME.

NOT only was Stephen Greene in the saloon, but so also was the supposed dead man. When the advance guard came rushing in the two were seated at a card table with a third man to fill out the game.

The sight was a shock that for the moment left the intruders with nothing to say. That Greene should be there was expected; but to find the man they thought a corpse in a place like the Happy Home, where he had never before been known to come, and engaged in a game of cards, which he had never before been known to do, was an astonisher. At first they did not believe it could be Doctor Farley at all. Dress and manner were totally unlike anything they had ever seen of him before.

When the doctor entered the saloon, some hours before, he had no very clear idea of what he came there for, in spite of the fact that he had left his daughter declaring that he was going to make a night of it with the boys.

Almost the first person he came across was Stephen Greene. The young man was as smiling as ever, although he was having a lonesome time. As a general thing Broad Ax was hospitable enough toward strangers, but toward this one no advances were made. He sat off by himself, smoking, and taking it leisurely.

The doctor approached him with the airiest of manner.

"A stranger to our rattling little burg, if I am not mistaken. At least I do not remember of ever seeing your face here before. Find it a little dull from the way things look? Been here long?"

Greene looked at him keenly, in spite of his smile. Considering that the doctor had been his fellow-passenger that day, and that he suspected half the town believed he had badly if not mortally wounded this identical gentleman, the address was, to say the least, a little cool. Notwithstanding the change in costume he had recognized Farley at once.

The look satisfied Greene that the doctor was in serious earnest. It was a puzzler to be sure; but it was possible. Professional men are sometimes very absent-minded. In addition, there was that shot received in front of the Western Continent. The wound was covered by a small slip of court-plaster, and did not look as though it was of much account, but the young man was wise enough to suspect that it had something to do with this strange lack of recognition. He answered quietly:

"My first appearance in Broad Ax; and if I don't find the town a little more to my taste after a few hours more experience I think it will be my last. I generally judge a town by the first couple of hours in it, and so far I'll own up, I don't like it. They say Hard Pan is a rattling little burg, and I reckon I may as well go on in the next stage."

"Tut, tut! What's the trouble with Broad Ax? We try to treat all new-comers right, and want to turn the drift of travel this way. Stay a week and I will lay something at odds that you will want to die here, before you will be willing to give it up."

"Ha, ha! That is just the trouble. I have an uncomfortable feeling that if I stay here I will die here, whether I want to or not; and that considerably before my time comes. Thanks for your invitation, all the same."

"You don't do justice to our citizens. If a man comes in here I think I can assure him what is called a fair show. Of course, if he goes down to The Garland and sets up for a chief, he must have a good deal of backbone, and considerable executive ability to come out alive; but then, there is no need to go there. The Happy Home is good enough for me, and I should judge that it was about the kind of a place that you would admire to flourish in. Come! For a few moments accept the protection of my wing, and

make the acquaintance of some of the men of Broad Ax. I don't know who you may have met to make you so discouraged with our ways and works; but I know that the men you will find here are not the sort you seem to have struck heretofore. To get acquainted there is only one royal way in the West, and that is to drink together. I suppose you sometimes indulge?"

"Not too frequently; but in a mild way we couldn't keep house without it. I haven't cared to drink alone; and I declare, the outlook hasn't been very encouraging to call any one up. Whisky straight is my vanity, and just at the present time I don't care if I do."

As the doctor by this time had been pretty generally recognized there was no lack of opportunity to introduce his friend, from whom he had inquired his name as they moved toward the bar.

At the Happy Home the principal prejudice against the stranger was founded on the fact that he seemed to be an unlucky man to have anything to do with, and the doctor could not complain that his *protege* was not met with all due courtesy. There was no allusion to the little accident in front of the Western Continent, and Farley seemed to have forgotten all about it.

Stephen made himself very much at home in the crowd, but when the doctor gently steered the way toward one of the small tables that were reserved for the use of the short card-players, he followed without hesitation.

Of the four seats at the table one was already occupied.

As they approached, the eyes of Stephen Greene were by chance fixed on the doctor, and he thought that he saw him give a start, as if the sight of this individual was a surprise, and not altogether an agreeable one. Scarcely anyone else would have noticed it, but Greene was a close observer, and seldom missed seeing all that was to be seen.

The stranger did not appear to notice it, as he looked up carelessly, gave a slight nod as the two sunk into their seats, and then went on, meditatively pulling at the cigar he had but just lighted.

"Excuse me," said the doctor, who appeared to be in a humor this evening that embraced all out doors.

"My name is Farley—J. Lucius Farley, M. D., as they would have it on the small bills. My friend, Mr. Greene, and I were about to sit down to a little game of cards. If you ever indulge we should be pleased to have your company."

"Thanks for the invitation. It is what I would have most desired, but did not care to intrude by asking. My name is Garland—ah—Harry Garland, as my friends have it. I am not notorious for either skill or luck; but one must find some way of killing the time in this one-horse place, even if it is at the expense of a small outlay. What is your game? I confess to not having much experience in anything but eucher."

Again Stephen Greene made a mental note, and glancing at Farley, had an idea that he had noticed the same thing. There was a trifling hesitation after the individual had given his name as Garland. Perhaps the rest of it was Harry, and perhaps it was not. If either of the others was at all inclined to be suspicious, it is more than likely he thought it was not.

There was no sign that Doctor Farley had such an idea, as he answered:

"Eucher be it, then. There is just as much amusement in that, and there is a possibility of economy in it that you don't find in unlimited draw."

Without much more preliminary conversation the game began.

For a gentleman like Doctor Farley to deliberately "rope" a stranger into a game of cards was something queer enough to those who knew the man; but when it came to two strangers, and into a game of "cut-throat," there could hardly be any doubt that he was a little off. Of course the bystanders did not know anything about the manner in which he had picked these men up; but they were pretty well interested before long in the game, and crowded around the table, to the number of a dozen or more.

At first there was a pretty unanimous idea that the doctor had got himself into trouble. The opinion of the crowd was that Stephen Greene, in spite of his smile, was no more than a card-sharp, who knew the paste-boards by name, and that the stranger whom he had last picked up, whom no one remembered to have seen enter the saloon, was like unto him.

If the two had showed by their play that they were in partnership, no one would have been very much surprised.

The most singular thing of all was, that after half an hour of play the doctor had shown not only that he knew the game from the rudiments up, but that he had a strength and finesse that had rarely been seen in the Happy Home, where card-playing was looked upon as a science, and where the majority of the visitors were deeply versed in its lore.

The game began in a perfunctory sort of manner, as though there was a certain amount of

time to be killed and this was the most pleasant way to do it. There was even some little conversation, during which the stranger announced that he had visited the city on business, involving some legal interests, and the settlement of an old case; and made some inquiry concerning the older residents, their names, and so on.

But by and by, all that ceased. The sharp with a smile, as some one had dubbed Stephen Greene, still smiled, but he looked like a different man, for all that. Garland grew more than interested, if the way his glittering eyes watched every movement in the play could be taken as a sign, while the face of the doctor had taken on a marble immobility that made him look more like a professional sport than either of the others.

What made the thing the more interesting was the fact that either from skill or good luck Farley was winning all the time. He got three games out of four, and the rest of the games were about evenly divided between the other two.

"A little slow, is it not?"

The doctor had just won, and as he drew in the stakes he looked up with a stereotyped smile on his face.

"It seems to be my night on for eucher; but if either of you prefer something else I am willing to change the game, even if it breaks my luck. We might even things up and then stop."

"Any thing at all," laughed Greene. "Now that I have begun I don't seem to care what I try my hand at. I would just as soon pull straws for a million as not—if I had the million."

"And if you will put a reasonable limit on it I might as well try draw. I can't do worse at it."

And it was the game at draw, when it had reached the most exciting point, that the mob intruded on.

CHAPTER IX.

CHRISS CROCKLY RETIRES IN BAD ORDER.

THE doctor was not slow to recognize that something of importance, in some way concerning himself, was on foot. Unfortunately the events that immediately followed the arrival of the stage at Broad Ax, although remembered after a certain sort, were as though they had happened a core of years before.

It was rather a strange case all through, but such things have happened often enough for one to be able to call them of frequent occurrence. The sequence of his life was just turned around. While he recognized the people with whom he had been of late associated as the ones he must look for, he only remembered them, and not their actions. As he had been in the West years before, and had seen many stirring scenes, he was not at all taken aback to see a delegation of bad men filing into the Happy Home. He brushed his arm back carelessly to assure himself that his revolvers were all right—things that he had carried before for months—held the cards carelessly in his hand, and looked up at the leaders, as they came straight for that table.

"Well, Larry, and what is the matter with you?"

The man at the head of the deputation was Larry O'Brien. He was a reckless, hard-fighting Irishman, if once fairly started, but was known as an honest man, and a great friend of the doctor. Twice had Farley pulled him through when he had been near to death. It was certain that he was not there for the purpose of mischief so far as the doctor was concerned. At the question Larry scratched his head in a puzzled sort of way, and looked hard at Stephen Greene.

"Sure, an' it's not did that ye are, afther all. Glad it is that Oi am to see it; an' it's that spalpeen forninst ye, phat troyed to murder ye that we're going to swing by his hales a bit, an' thin lit him know he's not wanted here. The dirty scut! An' if he's bin givin' ye any av his lip, er put ye in fear av yer loife, as sure Oi jedge he may, seein' that he's sittin' there quite confidential loike, say the worrud, an' we'll have him cloimb the tree, sure enough."

"Larry," said the doctor, looking calmly at the Irishman, "you are a good-hearted fellow when you are sober, but naturally inclined to be an idiot when you have been drinking. I guess that's what is the matter now. What in the name of wonder are you talking about? and who do you mean when you talk of scuts and spalpeens? I don't suppose you are afther me, and if you think I can't take care of myself it's just about as bad. Better go home and put your head to soak. If you're no better in the morning send for me and I'll give you a physic; but at present, I swear I don't think you are fit to be on the street."

Very fortunate for the doctor was it that Larry had not been drinking, since, with a little priming, he would not have stood that sort of talk from even Dr. Farley. Instead of growing angry he looked around in a bewildered sort of way, as he muttered:

"Sure, Oi don't onderstand it at all. They towld me that this same mon was afther troyin' to shoo't ye did; an' as a fri'nd Oi come down wid the b'yes to rin him out av town. Av he's

a fri'nd av yourn, too, mebbe it's all a mish-take."

He was pointing at the smiling stranger as he spoke, and as he closed gave a step backward as if he intended to give up any share he had intended to have in the proceedings. As far as Larry was concerned there would have been no more trouble. It was the men behind him that were not so easy to dispose of.

There was a crowd of them, and they did not intend that this conversation should be heard by any but the two between whom it passed. They were all talking themselves, and as Larry fell back the doctor had the chance to hear what they were saying.

"Hang him, anyhow! If he didn't kill him it wasn't for want of trying. Everybody knows the sort that Doc Farley is. The fellow has him under cow and is just getting away with his luggage. Roust him out ov camp an' you'll hear another tune from ther doctor. All tergether, an' fetch him along!"

That was the way that the crowd talked; not any one man, but a dozen, speaking at once. Anything else that was said became unintelligible, as a chorus of yells arose from the men that were still surging through the door. The house was almost full, and forward came the wave until it was on the point of swallowing up the three who still sat at the little table.

Then the doctor became more serious. It was plain that the men were bent on mischief, and that there was but little real regard for him in the matter. The mob had pushed in so as to cut off the three from the regular *habitudes* of the Happy Home, and were going to carry through their purpose with a whoop. Greene continued to smile; Garland looked serious; but Farley suddenly straightened himself up from his chair, and there was a pistol in either hand as he faced the crowd.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a cool, business sort of tone, "I hope I have been long enough with you to have thoroughly convinced you all that I am strictly a man of my word, because I wouldn't like to take some poor devils, as it were, unawares. If the town has anything to do or say to me personally and about myself, I am willing to listen, and to await action without any preliminary violence. But, when you undertake to attack my friend—that is a different matter. The gentleman who gets too close until this is all straightened out will most probably never know what it was that hurt him; and the camp will be attending to his obsequies tomorrow. Hold hard there! Another step and there will be blood on the floor."

The first movement of the doctor was so unexpected that it caused a halt, and even a recoil, of those in the front rank. There were others who did not see, and who were pressing forward to get to the front. They did not intend that the movement should be delayed until an opposition that was worth considering should be developed. As they were not in the range of the doctor's irons they did not quite so clearly see why there should be any hesitation.

The result was some confusion among the rioters, which gave Johnny Wardle, the proprietor of the place, and some of his followers, time to push along by the wall until they were almost in supporting distance of Farley. They had no idea of the cause of the outbreak, except as they gathered it from the excited cries of the mob; but Johnny always had peace in his saloon, if he had to fight for it; and in this case he thought that Farley was a safe man to back.

The doctor never noticed his allies. He was watching every move of the men that had proclaimed themselves to be lynchers; and he was doing it as coolly as if he were a fire-eater of the first water, besides being an old sport to boot. If there was any truth in words, or actions that spoke just as loud, there was to be no getting at Greene, save over his dead body.

That was a length that the most of those present were not prepared to go. Their pretext and practice would have been showing altogether too wide a discrepancy.

The front rank hung back more and more, while those in the rear abated in their enthusiasm. The solid bluff of one man against the town looked very much like winning. The backward motion that began as Farley handled his tools seemed almost ready to turn into a panic. If it had not been for Chriss Crockly, the affair would have been over.

Just now Chriss was inclined to rate himself as a man of double importance. He represented both himself and the worst man in Broad Ax. He delighted in such scenes on his own account; and when he was working under the private orders of Orange Able, it made him a good deal more reckless. He stepped in with a more savage grin than usual on his face.

"It won't do, Doc. You orter know better than ter take up fur ther gerloot. You kin shoot me down, ef yer likes; but it won't be healthy fur either you er the man ye'r' backin' ter do it. 'Stid ov jest runnin' him out, ez we figgered on, it would end with hangin' all three. Broad Ax hez se'd he must leave, an' he's got ter go. At him, boys, while I hold ther doctor! He ain't a blame fool, ter kick when he sees he hez ter come down."

Chriss had considerable nerve, anyway, and

was pretty certain that Farley would not shoot after hearing his threat. If he once got hands on him, it would be easy enough to hold him until the crowd could hustle out the stranger that they were after. He was notoriously the strongest man in the camp, and there were few, if any, that cared to tackle him in a rough-and-tumble. Without giving the doctor any time to answer, he jumped at him with outstretched hands.

Then followed the most astonishing thing of the evening. The doctor's weapons disappeared as suddenly as they had come into view, and he sprang forward so unexpectedly, that he had Chriss around the waist before that worthy knew he was coming. One terrific tug and wrench, one stupendous heave, and Farley had him off the floor and over his hip. Then there was a dexterous fling, and the bully went crashing through the window, taking glass and sash as he went.

The shout that went up from the men that witnessed the doctor's feat assured him that he had the crowd on his side, though he hardly imagined how little short of a miracle it seemed to them. When a man who, for the months of his residence there, had been looked at as a quiet, peaceable, studious gentleman, of decidedly more brain than muscle, branches out after such a style, and takes hold of a fellow that there is a general desire, outside of his own clan, to see go down, it is so surprising that it becomes wildly laughable. A dozen hands were being thrust forward with a desire to "put it there, pard!" that were only a moment before only a moment before only waiting to clutch at Stephen Greene's throat, in spite of the avowed friendship of Farley.

"Well done, Doc!" said Johnny Wardle, who had managed to work his way through the crowd that was flowing around and between.

"I didn't think it was in you, and I won't say a word about the glass. But, he's an ugly sort of a customer, and may be coming at you to get even. I'll put a gang at the door to bounce him if he tries it on, but lookout for yourself going home."

"Don't be alarmed about me, Johnny. If they will crowd me, that's my style every day in the year. Gentlemen, will all hands join me at the bar?"

CHAPTER X.

TWO LOVERS TALK.

ALL hands did join, save certain friends of Chriss, who sidled out to explain to that worthy that it was not their night on, and that if he wanted to rid the camp of either Greene or the doctor it would be policy to wait for a more convenient season, since just then the crowd was on the other side.

Somewhat to their surprise he did not saturate the air with any particular charge of brimstone, but only shrugged his shoulders and growled:

"Call it off fur ter-night. I ain't hurr, an' it's no use ter buck ag'in' Farley when he holds a full hand. Mebbe we kin even up ag'in. Fur me, I'm goin' back ter ther Garland, an' fill myself full ez a lord, an' think it out how he done it. It's a trick wu'th knowin'."

To himself he grumbled as he moved away: "Ef Orange hed seen that he wouldn't be so blamed anxious fur ther doctor not ter be hurt. I hain't goin' ag'in' orders ter-night, but ef I don't break his back ter pay him fur that, I'm a liar frum 'way off."

At the bar the doctor showed to about as much advantage as he had done on the floor. He took his whisky straight, and took his honors like a man to whom they belonged. He smiled a little loftily at the praise showered on him, and his tone was somewhat patronizing as he spoke:

"Come, come; there was nothing about that but a little trick that Crockly didn't happen to be up to. You are only trying to guy me. If you think I am going to put on frills in consequence, in the language of the unrighteous, you are away off. It may seem a little surprising to you, but to me the only wonder is that it, or something like it, had not happened before. I am a little slow to move about my own affairs, however, and it takes a wrench at my friends to bring me out."

By this time Greene had made himself generally familiar with the crowd, while Garland was getting more and more at home. As the latter professed to have heard nothing of the occurrences at the Western Continent, he had the story told to him, with all the suspicions and conjectures added.

The doctor listened as though it was all a matter of so little importance that he wondered why any one should be inclined to deem it worthy of notice. Nevertheless, he entered languidly into the conjectures as to who it was that fired the shot that so nearly terminated his existence, but was rather inclined to think that it was only a random, accidental shot, that had been discharged by some one who knew nothing of the gathering in front of the hotel, and who would have been horrified if he had seen the results of his own carelessness.

The game that had been interrupted so unexpectedly was not resumed, but for a while the

doctor had more success in his efforts to make a night of it than he had expected when he started out. It was at a late hour that he returned to the hotel, where two ladies had been anxiously looking for his appearance, in spite of an encouraging note that one of them had received.

When Hilgarda threw her arms around him, and greeted him with all the effusion due to a lost sheep that had unexpectedly returned, Farley frowned a little; but said nothing as he disengaged himself from her embrace. He kissed his daughter kindly, and then went to bed.

Hilgarda looked as though she had something to say, but having glanced uneasily at Nina she allowed him to leave without further comment.

"I am afraid, dear," she then said, when her brother was fairly out of hearing, "that your home coming, such as it is, has not been very cheerful. Yet, though I never saw brother act as he has done to-night, I must say that I think it is time that you came. Perhaps your influence may avail where I have not been able to effect anything. It is too late to-night to say more; but unless I can obtain from him a promise, in a day or so, I must speak to you."

"Why, what is it that you mean?" asked Nina, aghast at the air of mystery that her aunt had assumed.

"Nothing serious, I hope. I confess that I have been pained that he should have left us alone for the whole evening, and should have seemed so different from anything I had hitherto seen in him; but the unfortunate wound, for which I blame myself, accounts for that. By morning I hope that he will be entirely himself in mind, and none the worse in body."

Hilgarda shook her head dismally.

"It is not that, my dear. I have been watching how things were going for a long time, and have warned him more than once. He has laughed at my warnings; but I am afraid that some day he will weep when he remembers them, and finds that it is too late—if, indeed, it is not now—to profit by them."

"I do not understand you. In the name of mercy, what is it?"

"In a word—extravagance. Your father is not a rich man, my dear; and he has met with serious losses, as I happen to know. Yet, instead of practicing economy, and trimming his sails to the weather, he has gone on at the same wild rate, until I am afraid that he is getting hopelessly involved, either in debt, or something worse. Say nothing of what I have told you, but be prepared for a shock when you hear my suspicions. I must not detain you any longer, now. Good-night! You know your own room, and remember that we are all in hearing distance if you call."

This sort of confidential talk, that was no confidence at all, would have alarmed most young ladies; but Nina was not easily troubled, especially when she had her mind about as thoroughly occupied as it well could be. Then she had been anxiously waiting for her aunt to leave her, since she had an appointment with Doctor Levant, as she called him for the present. When Miss Hilgarda had finally disappeared she ran along the passage, and darted into the room that served as parlor, waiting-room, and occasionally as spare bedroom.

"Well, I think I may say that your father got back none the worse for his evening out, though I must confess there was a time when I had my doubts whether he would be able to do it. But I found that, as usual, I have made a mistake. Doctor Levant is nowhere. If the doctor ever had any scientific hobbies he has lost them, and—would you believe it—is going in for sport. If I could dawn in on him in my own character, with a few yards of frills attached, and drop the name that unluckily he is familiar with, I think that I would suit him to a charm. The idea of his saying that I was a vagabond and a gambler, not worthy of association with a lady, because he had evidence that I had played an occasional game of cards. After what I saw to-night it is too ridiculous. It makes me mad all over."

Blackburn spoke a little wearily, and with the sense of having received a personal affront. In view of what she had just heard from Hilgarda, Nina was interested at once.

"Tell me the truth. What has he been doing? Aunt has been trying to terrify me by the most gloomy forebodings, and now you are, if anything, worse. If he had been guilty of all the crimes mentioned in the decalogue, she could not have been more solemnly mysterious. I came to you for consolation, and you treat me as though I was Job, and you were a chief comforter."

"But the idea of his objecting to me as a sport. Why, good heavens! He is a sport himself, all over; and from 'way-back. I can't teach him anything. I thought I knew something about draw-poker, but he calls all the cards by name, and left a pair of pretty fair players out in the cold. If he was not your paternal ancestor I would say he was a fraudulent old humbug, and ask, how long that sort of nonsense he was feeding us with had been going on?"

"Come, Morton, don't be slangy," whispered

Nina, smiling in spite of herself at the vexation shown by her lover.

"You promised me you would not. I wish you would explain what you mean. You must understand how anxious I am, and that, so far, your conversation has been all Greek to me."

"Well, it is simple enough. That little crease on his head has set him upside down, and he has blossomed out as a first-class sport, much to the bewilderment of all Broad Ax. What makes it so surprising is that he has fitted himself right into the character. A man may imagine himself an elephant; but that don't make him able to carry a ton. If your father had not had both skill and sand, though, he would have gone up the flume."

Nina gave a little cry of distress. The intelligence was hard to bear.

"The worst of it is, that though he seems all sport, he did not take to me kindly at all when I met him in the garb of another. He did not say anything—indeed, he rather sought my company, and treated me with any amount of good will—but I could see in his eyes that he did not like me a bit. They say there is a right way and a wrong way of doing things; but somehow, I've missed them both, trying to get into your father's good graces. He will have no use for Doctor Levant; and he looks at Harry Garland as though he would like to shoot him. The queerest thing of all is, that he seems to have taken quite a fancy to this Stephen Greene, who is at the bottom of the present trouble, confound him! If he had kept out of the way we should have had nothing but plain sailing."

"But as Doctor Levant you had a chance to save his life; or the next thing to it. Do you imagine that father has no gratitude?"

"Oceans of it, my dear, but misdirected. He has forgotten all about my humble services, and the transfusion nonsense. It is a little doubtful if he remembers that there is such an individual as Simon Levant, late of the U. S. Navy."

"How could he remember a thing that never was?" asked Nina gravely, but with a twinkle in her eye. Her spirits were beginning to come back to her. If the rest had let her alone she would not have troubled herself much more about Doctor Farley's condition. She could not see much change in him, and began more than ever to believe that he would be all right by morning.

"Very true, if you want to deal in paradoxes. But when a man has made a fool of himself he hates to see that it has been done without rhyme or reason. One thing has begun to dawn on my mind, however. As long as your father remains in his present frame of mind he will not be very apt to gush over Ira Wickfield as a prospective son-in-law. Ha, ha! The conceited little wretch! It was the joke of the season, to have him stand as sponsor just when I was debating the question of ways and means. Unsuspecting Ira! He brought in his rival with a flourish of trumpets; and started him off like a little hero—if he had only known it."

"Don't make fun of Mr. Wickfield, if you please," pouted Nina. "He seems to be very much of a gentleman; and from what papa says, is certainly a worthy man."

"Certainly, to be sure. But, Nina, dear, you want something better than a worthy man."

"Like yourself, sir. Really, when I think of the heartless treachery to my father and his friend I am ready to blush for shame. Let me go; I shall confess everything tomorrow, beg pardon, and be once more a good girl."

"But, Nina! Surely—"

Then the young man, who was staggered by the sudden change in her tone, possessed himself of the young lady's hand, and detaining her with gentle violence began to plead his cause in a way more or less incoherent—and consequently perfectly natural.

"There, now, sir," she said, at length.

"You have made your peace, after the most approved fashion; let me go before we fall out again. Of course, if papa remains obstinate, that settles it. I will let you try, for a little longer, at least, to win him over in your own way, though I do not promise that I will not reveal everything at a moment's notice, if I find that you are not treating us fairly. Of course, I intend to be guided by papa's judgment in all things—when I find he won't be guided by mine."

"In regard to Mr. Wickfield included?"

"And in regard to Mr. Wickfield."

Mort Blackburn groaned.

He was careful not to make the sound so loud that it would or could be heard outside of the room; but it reached Nina's ears very plainly, and she felt some tender compunctions.

"Don't, please don't. At least, not quite so loud, if you please. And let me give you a word of comfort. I don't believe that Ira Wickfield is going to be overpoweringly attracted by your humble servant, since I am very sure that he is already half in love with my aunt. She is by no means venerable, in spite of the relationship, and if she has set her eye on him she will win in spite of all of us."

"I wish I could believe it," dismally retorted Blackburn, on whom the events of the evening seemed to have a peculiarly depressing effect.

"But if the fellow is not dead in earnest about being Doctor Farley's son-in-law I am horribly mistaken. Why, do you know, he was actually out on the trail with a Winchester and a back-load of revolvers, lying in wait for the Cross-eyes, in case they attempted to interfere with your serene majesty? That's the way I came to meet him."

"Gallant fellow! It makes one feel that life is not all in vain, to meet with such devotion. And, pray, what were you doing out there, that you happened to meet with him?"

"I? Oh, well, I may as well tell it. I was out on pretty much the same style of errand."

"Another gallant fellow! Am I not blessed in having two such admirers? There, now! I feel ever so much better since I have had a talk with you. Take care of your precious self; do nothing rashly; and we will all hope that father will be better in the morning. But he must never suspect. Good-night, good-night."

Without allowing her lover much time for leave-taking Nina glided away from him, and a moment later was safe in her own room.

CHAPTER XI.

"OH, LUCIUS, I KNOW ALL!"

DR. FARLEY had been so long an inmate of the Western Continent that it had begun to seem like home to him, and he had been anticipating a wrench when he took his leave of it. If it had not been for Nina he would have remained, but when he decided to bring her to Broad Ax he made up his mind that the hotel would not be the place for a young girl who had been brought up among the refinements of an Eastern boarding-school.

It was more than a little provoking that when he had gone to both trouble and expense to provide a home for her, he should find that she had just picked up one of those undesirable acquaintances he had been so anxious for her to avoid. By the merest chance he had already heard of Mort Blackburn. The adventure of which he was the hero was not at all discreditable, but its recital to the doctor had left in his mind the impression that the young man was simply a professional sport, who might have grace of manner and plenty of good looks, but was not at all the kind of person with whom he would willingly have his daughter intimate.

When the doctor arose the next morning the thought struck him that he had never felt better in his life. Yet there was a puzzle of some kind, and he could not for the life of him imagine what it was.

He remembered the events of the preceding evening with distinctness, and knew that, in the mind of all Broad Ax, he had come out of them with credit to himself. Why he should be possessed with a haunting sense of a certain unfitness about his performances he could not at first say, and it was only when he was almost startled by a knock and a voice at his door that it came to him like a flash.

"By Jove! I had forgotten Nina."

"In a moment, pet!"

"The girl is getting to be quite a woman. I suppose I shall have to turn over a new leaf and steady down. Let me see. There has been some talk about a young rascal named—um—Blackleg. No. Ah! Blackburn it was. That won't do. I've seen the folly of such things myself."

At this stage in his soliloquy he had finished dressing sufficiently to be at least presentable, so he opened the door, at which Nina had been patiently waiting.

The vision of female loveliness that dawned on him gave him a start. The younger Miss Farley was none the worse for her trip; if she had felt any fatigue it was all forgotten, and she had held a brief but pleasant interview with her lover. To Farley's eyes she was actually charming, while the good-morning kiss with which she greeted him was sufficient to confirm him in a dozen good resolutions.

"If this is the way you sleep in the morning I pity your poor patients," Nina laughingly averred, as she dropped down from her tip-toes, on which she had stood during the osculatory performances.

"Every one else in the house has had breakfast an hour or two ago. I was one of the lazy ones, but it seems like an age since aunt and I got up from the table. Come, hurry up. Hilgarda and I are dying to go over to the new house, and we intend to limit your time at the trenches. Mr. Wickfield was here—I can't say how long ago—to inquire after your health. I said you were still sleeping, so he went away with regrets. He left word that business would so detain him that he would not be able to call again before to-morrow."

The doctor had proceeded to finish dressing. As he listened he grew more and more interested.

Finally he stood motionless, staring at the wall in what, if Nina could have caught the expression of his eye, she would have declared was a puzzled way.

"Wickfield? Oh, yes. My partner in several little mining ventures, and, really, one of the best of fellows. I believe that I have mentioned him to you. He wanted to see me about that shaft, I suppose. Why can't he go ahead

on his own responsibility without waiting to get down my opinion in black and white? I will have to see him later. Fortunately, the health of Broad Ax, at the present moment, is almost perfect, so that I have plenty of time to take my immortal ease, besides showing you the sights. All right, here. Let's go to breakfast. Then I'll take you out to do the town. You and Hilgarda can see a dozen houses if you want to."

The doctor's appetite proved to be very good, and his humor of the best. Hilgarda joined them at the table; and while the two ladies looked on he talked and ate.

When appetite called for no more, and the end of the table that had been set for him was thoroughly cleared—happy coincidence—the ladies began to revert to the house, to which Hilgarda was anxious to take her niece, so that she might see what was to be her future residence, if, indeed, it was not ready for immediate occupancy. If they could have seen what was passing in Farley's mind they would no doubt have been more frightened than amused, though there was a comical side to it.

The fact was that the house had entirely escaped his memory, and when Nina had spoken of it while in his room, he had not understood her at all.

Fortunately for him, his seeming reluctance to speak was entirely misunderstood, and he held the two at arm's length from the subject, until their conversation gave him to understand what it was that they meant.

It was the first intimation that the doctor had that there was anything wrong.

"Confound it," he thought. "What can the matter be? It don't seem to me that I am particularly absent-minded this morning. In fact, I never felt quite so vigorous in my life before. I don't like it. There may be something of importance that I have forgotten altogether. If I can't remember a thing like that, who knows what thing of importance I may be forgetting? And there must be a cause for it. Never was that way before that I know of. Wonder if it is excitement over the coming of Nina? But confound me, if I hadn't forgotten her, too."

Once recalled to his mind there was no trouble in remembering all about the residence, so, after breakfast was over Farley escorted the ladies through the town, pointing out the few points that he thought might be said to be of interest, and finally reached the little cottage, which was to be the future residence of himself and family.

A very neat little building it was, and amply large for a frontier residence. There was nothing pretentious about it, but it gave every evidence of having been planned by some one of good taste, who made the best use possible of the materials at hand.

The doctor had not expected to enter upon its occupancy for a week or so after his return, but the simple furniture was already in its place, and everything ready for housekeeping. Nina fell in love with the house on sight, and declared for immediate possession.

"And so it really pleases you? I am agreeably disappointed. I feared that after the way you have always lived, this would seem like death and poverty themselves. I tried in my humble way to make it all as complete as possible; but it was rather an up-hill work. The same amount expended further East would have built a moderate sort of a palace. Here you pay two prices for everything out of the ordinary run."

"Was there anything extra for that lovely grove behind the house? That is the feature that strikes me most. I expected a cabin, and find a—well, if this is not your moderate sort of palace, I do not know what would be. But the grove gives the finishing touches. And the garden wall. If it was not for the paint I would never believe that everything had not been so for dozens of years. You must have had Aladdin's lamp."

"Not exactly his lamp; but it took a fair-sized pocketbook, and that is a fact. If it pleases you it will have been money well expended. Hilgarda seemed to think that you would never know the difference; or that you might prefer advising on some of these expenditures yourself. I said that there would be plenty more to arrange for, and that I had only gone into the things that were absolutely necessary. I wanted it to look as if it was possible for you to call the place home."

Then Nina, who had not known much about "home" in her lifetime, having been at an institution since the period of her earliest recollections, came very near to crying, and expressed her gratitude and happiness so prettily, that her father felt repaid for all the outlay that he had made, or contemplated. Altogether they were a very happy pair; and when Nina declared that there should not be the delay of a single day about moving in, he never thought for a moment to consult Hilgarda, who had heretofore been his counselor about domestic affairs, but agreed at once.

After that they investigated everything, and even went out to lounge in the grove that had seemed to Nina to be so pleasant, "to see how it would do."

Hilgarda had said but little. The conversation was going along nicely without her, and she had already seen that, for the present at least, father and daughter, at times almost forgot her presence. She had something to say, but it was to the doctor himself, and it began to look as if the opportunity was not going to come that morning. It was a chance that sent Nina into the house to look at the arrangement of things once more, and left the others out under the trees.

"Ah, brother Lucius, it is all very charming, and if it was not yet to be paid for it is possible that it would seem but a fit dwelling for such a dainty bird as our dear Nina. Yet, when she knows the cost, it may be she will tell you that she would have been better content with plainer quarters."

"Heaven bless us, Hilgarda! What has got into you now? The ranch might be a worse one, I'll admit, and yet be good enough to live in; but such as it is, it is paid for from corner-stone to chimney-cap; and if the day ever comes that you need it I am ready to put you up its mate, on the other side of the road, there. I am half inclined to think that you imagine, since I have Nina, I am going to forget you. You should know me better."

The doctor spoke warmly, but there was no trace of anger in his tones. He was really too much attached to the sister who had been like a daughter also, for so many years. Nor was he so much hurt, either. He knew that Hilgarda sometimes said strange things, that were only from the lips, and he did not doubt her affection, or think that she was simply trying to wound him.

But she was very serious, now; and went on without taking notice of either the jest or the promise.

"Paid for it maybe—but how? That is the dreadful question that I have been asking myself, over and over, until at last I got the answer that sent the blood in frenzy through my veins. Oh, Lucius! I know all!"

CHAPTER XII.

A LISTENER IN THE BUSHES.

As Miss Hilgarda uttered her remarkable statement she dropped her voice to a stage whisper. That is to say, she shot it out with an intense sibilation, that made it all the more readily heard in the distance. Of course she had no idea that there was a listener in the underbrush; but such there was.

The listener was Orange Able. He had not sought his place of concealment for the purpose of spying upon the doctor, and his relatives; but had been waiting in that especial copse to meet several men with whom he had an appointment. He had not revealed himself until it was too late to do so without appearing in a worse light than circumstances actually justified; and as there seemed but little danger of his being unmasked if he remained quiet, he not only did so, but kept both eyes and ears open.

From his position he could see fairly well, and when Hilgarda uttered her remarkable assertion he was a little astonished at the effect it had upon the doctor.

If circumstances would have permitted, Orange would have uttered a long whistle. As the next best thing he pursed up his lips and went through the motions.

"What in the name of wrath is the woman driving at? The doctor can't be a fraud. He let out a queer sort of kink last night, but there was nothing in it that calls for those tears. If there had been anything crooked about him since he came to Broad Ax I would have known of it. Upon my soul, I believe she is charging him with a crime; and he acts as though he was guilty of it. It would be money in a man's pocket to know all about it, and I reckon that Miss Farley is not done yet. She and Nina seem to understand each other, and it looks monstrous much as though the young girl had got out of the way and left them alone on purpose."

Able had reason enough for his suspicions. The doctor had not received Hilgarda's strange words as an innocent man should have done. He was speechless from their shock, and as he staggered back it was evident from his face that they were as unexpected as they were appalling.

For a little there was a silence, during which Hilgarda stared straight into the face of her brother, seemingly reading there all that she had expected, and even more.

"Alas, Lucius," she murmured, as she threw her arms about his neck; "I see that you understand me. Do not think that, though erring, you are any the less dear. So far, the secret seems to rest in our bosoms, alone; and it may be that it will remain there, closely locked, forever. Only assure me that it will be the end of its kind, and that, whatever may come, you will sin no more. Promise me, Lucius; if not for my sake, then for Nina's. After crime generally comes discovery and retribution. There is sometimes a chance to escape from the outward consequences, though the heart bears the wounding of the inward stings."

Hilgarda, after seeing how her charge had affected her brother turned away her eyes. She did not care to witness all that would no doubt

be expressed in his countenance, and in that way lost part of the story that the play of his features revealed.

There was no doubt that he had an unpleasant secret, and one that was connected with a crime; but he was not too much confused by the unexpected charge to note that there were certain discrepancies, that might be only caused by his sister's loose way of talking; or they might indicate that her knowledge was not as thorough as she intimated.

Unfortunately it was too late to deny, since he knew only too well that he had already confessed. The only question was, how far to take her into his confidence.

"I should think that I had given pretty good hostages for the future," he remarked at a venture, as he gently removed her arms from his neck, so that he could obtain a better view of her face.

"I do not know whether it is best to say more at present. Yet, as a few uncautious words from you might work more damage than you could suspect, I shall not say that you are altogether off of the track in the suspicions—they cannot be more—that you seem to have. The fact is, I have reason to believe that there is a detective here in Broad Ax, now, who is on my trail. If he were to hear any such damaging suspicions as those you have just been ventilating I am afraid to say what might be the consequences. Never allow your lips again to utter anything in regard to the matter until you have my permission to speak. The day may come when everything can not only be explained, but when every item can be told to the world. Until then, silence is imperative."

Hilgarda was scarcely prepared to hear her brother speak in such a manner after the confusion that he had manifested but a moment before; nor did it at all agree with what she considered to be the facts of the case. The line that he had adopted seemed to her to argue more depravity than she had believed him guilty of.

"But, Lucius, if the same causes that led you into this difficulty continue to operate, how can you expect to escape the meshes of the horrible net? And if you are already suspected, how can you expect to escape capture. I fear that your case is hopeless. Do not fear to trust me. Just now, all I can think of is flight; and with Nina here, to look after, that seems to be impossible. Oh, my dear brother, what will you do?"

"Nothing, of course. The delay of Garland makes me believe it is evidence more than arrest that he is after. Let him look for it and welcome. Where nothing exists nothing can be found. So long as he makes no charges, awakens no suspicions in the community, he may go on with his work."

"Why, then, should you fear him at all?" asked Nina, with some shrewdness. She did not understand her brother's anxiety, if he was so sure that nothing could be proved against him.

"Because, if there was not wealth to fight I would place myself in his hands without hesitation. He is one of those men whom a criminal can never expect to evade. When he is on the search of a man, whether guilty or not, he always runs him down. He will never manufacture evidence, however; and if he finds none he may leave me to myself again. There is a world of honesty about Dan Garland and his ways."

"Ah, if it be so, why not meet the man half-way? Put yourself in his hands with what you can tell him, and employ him to prove your innocence."

"That would never do. It would be courting danger. But let us drop this subject for the present, and talk about our new home."

Hilgarda, who had become greatly excited during this conversation, now conquered her emotions. The two entered the house and in a few moments she was the gayest of the gay. She joined her voice to that of Nina in asking that they move into their new residence at once; and thus beset, the doctor laughingly consented.

"Only," he said, and there was a twinkle in his eye as he spoke, "you must remember one very important thing. Love nor money can get a servant in Broad Ax, who is fit to preside over the culinary department. I had intended to send back where such things grow. I fancy that your combined wisdom will be unable to solve the domestic problems that from time to time will arise. Besides, there is a deal of hard work about it. I ought to know, for I 'botched it' long enough to find out."

"Humph!" responded Hilgarda. "It will be in the line of economy; and that ought to be enough to strengthen almost any one."

"To say nothing of the fact that I saw a John Chinaman this morning, who looked as though he might be hunting work. We'll hire him, and I'll show him whatever he don't know. They make famous cooks when they become a little Americanized. We must go at once and hunt him, or he may be engaged."

They moved away at that, and Orange Able was permitted to get out of his place of confinement. The parties he was to meet either had not come, or had silently withdrawn when they saw that the ground was occupied; but he did not care for that. His eyes sparkled with

satisfaction, and he strode off like a man who has just fallen heir to a fortune.

CHAPTER XIII.

MORT BLACKBURN LOOKS FOR MORE CLOTHES.

THE doctor made no objection to the Chinaman, only stipulating that he must come on trial for a day or so, to prove that he would be of some practical benefit before being positively engaged. Then, having escorted his fair charges to the neighborhood of the Western Continent, he set their faces straight for that retreat and went off to his office, to see if there were any callers, and to post a notice that he would be busy at his house more or less constantly for several days, and could be found there in case of emergency.

As they went along, Nina's mind was full of her Chinaman, while Hilgarda's thoughts were chiefly occupied with the detective, of whom she wished she had obtained from her brother more accurate information.

She had her own ideal, however, and now and then shot a keen glance at some passing stranger, thinking that if he was the man, she could read his errand in his face. When a young man approached, who differed much, in both dress and general appearance, from the average young man of Broad Ax, and whose gaze was fixed sharply upon them, she was certain that she had located him at last.

Nina uttered a little cry as he stepped forward, bowing as he came. She recognized Morton Blackburn, once more in his own character, and very determined to fight it out on that line if it took all summer. He had become more than ever satisfied that the Levant experiment was destined to end in failure; while, as Garland he was not a whit more acceptable. In the present mood of the doctor it was just possible that he would reconsider his decision, or at least give the young man a chance to show who and what he really was. It was to tell Nina this that he approached, uncertain what sort of a reception he would have. It was nonsense for him to think that Miss Hilgarda would recognize him, but he somehow took it for granted that she would; and had decided to introduce himself if Nina did not do it, and so forestall any unfavorable comment on his seeking Nina in the absence of her father. When he had bowed to the niece he turned to the aunt, and his lips were already opened to speak when an imploring gesture on the part of the young lady caused him to pause.

She had her finger on her lip, and was shaking her head, so that he waited an instant to see what was her meaning, or if she had anything to say.

Hilgarda saw the inquiring look and misunderstood it. "No doubt," thought she, "this man is about to try to gain some information in regard to my brother. If I allow him to speak with her he will turn her inside out. Yet, it is better to placate than to make a foe of the man who may yet be induced to give over his search, or even aid Lucius to escape. Better talk to him myself, and see if there is nothing to be done. I wish Lucius had told me whether he was a married man."

So, when Morton was about to avow who he was, and beg for a few moments' conversation, he was surprised to receive a graceful bend of the head and a winning smile from the aunt, that made Nina's face look almost like midnight by comparison.

"You must really excuse us. Nina is a complete stranger in the place, while I have but a limited acquaintance here. Could you tell me—"

Thus far Hilgarda got, before Blackburn was able to interrupt her.

"I and my time are at your disposal; but, for information I am not the proper person to apply to, since I am as great a stranger as yourself. When I mention my name you will probably understand better the object of my search."

"Perhaps it is not necessary to mention your name, and it may be that you are better known at Broad Ax than you think for," replied Hilgarda, in a tone of banter.

"So long as I am favorably known, I am certainly glad to find that I am no stranger," responded Blackburn, thinking that Nina had already given her aunt a hint of how matters stood. He would have completed his work of giving himself entirely away had he not caught another warning glance, that puzzled him more than her first greeting. He understood, however, that there was something Nina wished to tell him before he talked too freely, and so he decided to follow her lead in a non-committal way until he learned how the land lay.

To his great surprise, the aunt continued:

"It might be difficult for Mr. Garland to go anywhere without being recognized, and he must know that his reputation is so firmly established that he needs no introduction or sponsors. You will pardon me that I did not at first recognize you, but we ladies are slow to put two and two together. I knew that you were in the place—the movements of all great men are kept pretty closely in the public eye—and if my mind had not been otherwise occupied I would have recalled you at once, from the descriptions that I have heard. We are en route for the Western Continent, where, for the present, we are located. In the course of a day or so we will

be installed in our own home. My brother, Doctor Farley, is one of the old inhabitants here, and has a large acquaintance with the surrounding country. If he can in any way aid you I know that he will be glad to do so, and it might be well worth your while for you to see him, if you are here on a matter of sober business."

"How under the sun does she come to drop onto the Garland part of the racket?" was Mort's mental query.

"The doctor must have seen through me at first sight. And told her all about it. I thought that he was terribly shy. Or else there was so little real difference between my disguise and my every-day looks that a description of the one hits the other exactly. May as well go slow now, and give nothing away till I find out what is in the wind."

Of course he had to answer the lady in some sort of way, and he spoke without any hesitation.

"Thanks for the kindness of your offer of the doctor's services. Perhaps he will not be able to give me his attention at the present time, but I propose to call on him when he is at leisure, and have a serious talk with him. Miss Nina and I have met before, and I suppose that our slight acquaintance justifies me in speaking to her, though I hesitated until you spoke, yourself."

He looked up interrogatively at Nina, who saw that it was time for her to take a hand in the play. She was certain that the aunt had made a mistake of some kind, though what it was she was unable to guess. As she knew nothing about her father's suspicion that the stranger he met the night before at the Happy Home was a detective, or that Hilgarda had ever heard of him, it was useless for her to try to conjecture as to the nature of the blunder. As Mort had so carefully worded his answers that his actual identity had not been revealed, the young lady determined to take all the advantage she could of the blunder, and it might be that it would turn out a very fortunate thing. She smiled sweetly as she held out her hand.

"I have no doubt that papa will be glad to see you, though at present his time is too much occupied to allow him to spare much from his own affairs. He has been away so long that his mining interests demand considerable attention, to say nothing of his professional duties. And then, this moving of which my aunt speaks will keep him busy for a day or so. It looks like a simple thing to step from a hotel to your own house; but I suppose we will not find it so. If you wish to have any serious talk with him, and are not pressed for time, I certainly should advise that you wait now, until we can receive you at our own home. Meanwhile, as they have not got over considering me as a visitor, who is not to be troubled with the cares of the fitting, I will have nothing on my hands, and will be glad to meet some one outside of my own family who is not absolutely a stranger."

Nina seemed to be progressing too fast to suit her aunt. The latter interrupted her with a good-natured reproof; Blackburn had a word to say, and in a moment all three were walking toward the hotel, chatting volubly.

Nina, as a young lady just emancipated from boarding-school, was shrewd and reliant, besides having the average share of cultivated secretiveness. It was not difficult for her to outwit her aunt at all points, after she once got her young man in hand, and it was more than satisfaction for her to keep Mort silent in regard to the truth, which she found he was dying to speak, and to increase the error, whatever it might be, into which her aunt had fallen. And in spite of Hilgarda's intentions, she managed to have a few moments' private conversation with her lover before he left them.

As she was pressed for time she made her explanations brief; but it did not take her long to make him understand that she did not intend to allow him to reveal himself at present.

"No, sir; you have been amusing yourself; now, I want a little amusement on my side. If you dare to make any such move without consulting me, everything between us will be over forever. I know that it would end if you spoke to papa in his present humor. You must keep up either the Doctor Levant or the Harry Garland character until I give you permission to have them retire. And do be careful about aunt. It looks like a wild guess, but I really believe she imagines you are a detective, and it may be that father has the same notion. Now, if you want to really serve me, go and get clothed to suit the occasion and go in search of that Chinaman that was around this morning. See if he cannot be engaged as cook at the Farley mansion. If he can, bring him around to me for examination. We don't intend to starve; and as I expect Doctor Levant to be a frequent visitor at our house, his comfort may depend on your success. Hilgarda will be back in a moment, and she must not suspect that we have been having a confidential talk. And I want you, sir, to avoid having one with her. I can be furiously jealous, you must understand, and no one can predict what a jealous woman will or will not do. Something unpleasant, anyhow."

"Probably flirt with Mr. Wickfield," suggested the young man, who began to feel once more on firmer ground.

"For fear of driving you to despair, I assure you that I will remain as much a mystery as ever. When it is time to stop you can let me know. Till then, while I stay in Broad Ax, I promise you that my own mother would not be able to recognize me. And if you value the personal safety of Wickfield, give him a wide berth, or keep your aunt between. I can be jealous, too."

If it had not been for the return of Hilgarda, this might have led to a quarrel, but fortunately there was no time to get further than this, and they were as yet only laughing at the jest. In order to avoid all danger Morton thought it best to leave at once, and so he made his excuses and vanished.

"If there really is a Chinaman in town I don't remember seeing him," reflected Blackburn, as he strode away from the hotel.

"We are getting into no end of mystification, and before long I won't know who I am myself. May as well take the rest of the steps. By glory! If I can't find the Celestial that she is after, I'll make one that will suit as well. I think I may as well be where I can keep an eye on this Wickfield, who may be a grand rascal for all I know. Levant can return, now and then, from his excursions after antiquities, and Harry Garland—who seems to be mistaken for a detective—can appear and vanish after the most approved style of the Secret Service men. Ha, ha! If Doctor Farley could only imagine the game that is being set up, he would be mad as the maddest. If he never forgives, I don't know that he ought to be blamed so much. Perhaps there is a mystery in his past life. If there is, and one could get at it, it might make things more comfortable. At any rate, it will do no hurt to try to get at it. Garland, Levant and the Chinaman to find it out, and Blackburn to take advantage of it. All is fair in love and war. Ha, ha!"

And Mort began to look around for another change of clothes.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MISS AND A MILE.

MORT BLACKBURN had his pockets pretty well lined with money, and he knew its value, or, at least, that it would go a great ways toward effecting most anything. He had not seen the Chinaman, to whom Nina referred; and was almost inclined to think that he was a myth. Perhaps she intended to give him a hint.

If she did, and had imagined that he would personate the "washee-washee," he rather fancied that she would get a surprise before the affair was all over. Certainly, he did not intend to let her into the secret, until he saw that it would be to his advantage; and he laughed as he imagined her consternation when she found herself twice fooled. But first, and foremost he wanted to find if there really was an unattached Chinaman in town. If so there was a stroke of business to be done.

The Western Continent was the best place to begin the search, since it was there that the "heathen" would be most apt to apply for employment if he was a house servant. After walking around the next corner, so that he would be out of sight of the young ladies, Blackburn returned to the hotel by the back way, and began an investigation in the kitchen.

He commenced by inquiring if there was not a Chinaman in the town, who would do his washing.

The answer was not very encouraging. No such articles were known to be on hand, unless he chose to look over the last year's corpses, Broad Ax, in its early history had passed an edict, which barred them out, on pain of death. Of course there was provision for an hour's warning to leave; but on the obstinate ones, who had not perhaps understood the state of the case, the sentence of Judge Lynch's court had been sternly enforced. Since then, the sight of a Mongolian in the town proper was a rare one, and if necessity compelled one to enter, or to pass through, he was in fear and trembling until he once more was out. He had his notice from some one before much dust had gathered on his feet, and the history of the place confirmed its meaning. There were a few of the hated race in the mines, outside of what were known as the limits of the town, but they were careful to keep out of harm's way.

"Oh," said Mort, reflectively, "I thought that I saw one on the street this morning, and wanted to find out where he hung up. Thanks, Mrs. Finnegan will do as well. I will see her later."

Then he withdrew, and made his way to the Happy Home, reflecting on the pleasant feature in his contemplated personation, that had just been foreshadowed.

At the Home he found some traces of the fellow he was after. Johnny Wardle had seen him, so that there could be no doubt of his existence; and the opinion of the saloon-keeper was that the "heathen" belonged over the river, in Hard Hack Gulch, a little collection of shanties to the number of a dozen or more, where the expatriated wickedness of Broad Ax was wont

to gather in case there was no pursuit. It was as much as a man's life was worth to go there after night, but in daylight, and with a full hand of weapons, it might be risked. There had been several Chinamen there, and probably this was one of them.

So Johnny explained, all the time looking hard at the stranger, who had talked to him as though he was an old acquaintance, though Wardle, to save his neck, could not place him.

Mort explained, in return, that he would prefer to do his own washing if he could not find any one more available, and was again referred to Mrs. Finnegan.

"In for a penny, in for a pound," was his mental exclamation, when he again started on the search. "Guess I may as well take in the Gulch and get a sight of the beathen. All of them look pretty much alike, but I don't want to try it blind. There is nothing like having a model when you try to make up. If Levant, for instance, could rise from his grave, he could see himself as in a glass, when he looked at the antiquarian at the Western Continent."

Before starting out he took a small bundle to Mrs. Finnegan, so that if any one was to follow up his inquiries he would be thrown off the scent. Then he strolled out of town in an aimless sort of way, that might have deceived Nina herself; and in the course of an hour was wandering through Hard Hack Gulch, in search of his gentleman from the flowery land.

He had met no one on the way who would be apt to imagine his destination, and after he got there his success was phenomenal. Almost the first thing he saw was a "John" skurrying into a hut with an armful of grass and weeds. The fellow was a new arrival, and was making himself comfortable before commencing work.

"Hello, Johnny!" said Mort, lounging up to the low doorway. "Come out here and give an account of yourself. If you are after coin perhaps it will be worth your while."

"Melican man—'way off. No hap Johnny insidee. Hap Ah Chung insidee. W'at stlangee man wantchee!"

As the Celestial was at home he seemed to feel comparatively brave. He spoke more sharply than the majority of his countrymen, and came to the door without hesitation.

Something in the voice appeared familiar, and in the appearance of the fellow more so. Blackburn looked him all over before he answered. When he spoke it was with more than recognition in his tones.

"Ah Chung it is, sure as guns. Why, old fellow, what in the world sent you down here? You are just the man I want to see, and that's what's the matter. Come out here and talk things over. Don't you remember Mort Blackburn, that started your laundry at Blue Tank?"

At that the recognition was mutual. A broad smile overspread the face of Ah Chung, and he hastened out to meet Blackburn's outstretched hand with his own.

"That's right, Johnny. Don't forget your friends—you won't be apt to find so many of them in this section of the world. I didn't think of finding you here when I set out, or I might have walked a trifle faster. What brought you here, and what do you expect to do now that you have arrived? It's a worse place than ever Blue Tank was in the early days—and that is saying a heap."

"Blue Tank lun Ah Chung out. Him look loundee so fashion. No placee hap use fo' Ah Chung, him git up an' tlabble. Come Bload Ax—say him bettle walkee tbeah. Then him stlike Gulchee. Tollili sliendly. Tai-pan (the boss) saw, go to wuk Big Eagle Mine, ming-yat—to-morrow. Git houso allo maskee w'at tim hap tim. Ah Chung hap wuk, makee plenty cash piecee, gallow."

"All right, if you can take care of your neck after you get it, but they have an uncomfortable way of going through Chinamen that are suspected of having saved up any coin worth looking after. But that's not what I came after. There is a party in town that wants a cook, and I came over here to see if I could find any one that would fill the bill. How are you on the hash-pan?"

"Ah Chung him cookee. Him washee-washee. Him cookee, him bakee 'Melican fasson—tat him can do. Fl'st chop. Him no wantchee go Bload Ax. Too largee kille allo man from China-side. Him no cookee theat."

"That settles it. I only wanted to know, so that I could see my way a little clearer. You have a name and I can cook; suppose we combine the two. I can afford to pay you rather better wages than they will give you at the Big Eagle if you will help me a little; and perhaps you can go on with the work there besides."

Ah Chung was puzzled. He understood American fairly well, but this was a little beyond him, and so he said.

That brought on quite a conversation, which ended in Blackburn getting the promise of what he really wanted most of all, a disguise that should enable him to pass inspection when he presented himself at the house of the doctor. He was an adept at arranging disguises himself, but this was an emergency for which he was not prepared. There were other matters of im-

portance to discuss; but everything was done up in a hurry, and Mort was on his way back in a short time, fully satisfied with the result of his excursion.

"Guess I had better report to headquarters," he thought, as he entered the town.

"Nina will be waiting to learn the facts in the case with some anxiety. If it is a square deal she was giving me, the party may not go to housekeeping if there is no Chinaman in the near future; and if it was a bit of a joke that she was playing on her humble admirer, I think that I can make her open her eyes, both now and hereafter."

To his great surprise he found at the Western Continent that the move had been made already. At least the Farleys would room at their own residence for the future, though they would take their meals at the hotel until they could fully complete their domestic arrangements. The ladies had gone to the cottage, and the doctor was out of town, visiting his mine.

"Have to run the risks and move, too," thought Mort to himself. "I suppose that the old gentleman is out of the road for the balance of the day, and now will be the time to see how the land lays. There is no time to change clothes and character, and if I am to meet no one but the ladies, I don't see that there is any necessity for it, either."

So, in his own proper person, he presented himself at the cottage, and was met at the door by Miss Hilgarda, who had seen him coming.

"Welcome, Mr. Garland, to our humble abode. You are just too late to help carry in the trunks, and just too early to help to rearrange things, since we have decided to do nothing more until to-morrow, when we can have the advice of brother Lucius. But come in and see how snugly we shall be fixed. It begins to seem like home already."

Of course the invitation was not one to be slighted, and in a trice he was being shown over the house. Nina did not greet him quite so warmly; but that was not strange, with the keen eyes of her aunt upon her.

When they had gone over the building, Blackburn found a chance to say to Nina:

"I have found your Chinaman, and think I have arranged for him to come a few days on trial, unless he is scared off by the hoodlums of the town. The heathen are at a discount here, and he may, at the last moment, back out. He is living on the other side of the river at present, and it was hard work to convince him that it would be safe to come any closer to Broad Ax."

"Oh, a thousand thanks! Does he profess to know anything of work in the kitchen?"

"A little, and says he is belly good to learn."

A little shriek from Hilgarda interrupted the explanation; and then with wonderful agility Blackburn swung himself out of the window and disappeared, just as Doctor Farley rushed into the room, a drawn revolver in his hand.

CHAPTER XV.

ORANGE ABLE STARTS GUNNING.

"A MISS isn't half as good as a mile," was the way that Blackburn put it to himself as he skurried off, down the road, at his best rate of speed. He had one glimpse of the doctor, and did not want another. If it had not been for Hilgarda, that one would have been entirely too much; and as it was, as he scudded away from the window he was imagining all the time that he felt in his back a bullet from the revolver flourished by the irate father.

It is possible that the adventure would have had some such serious termination had it not been for the elder Miss Farley. Her cry, that served as a warning, had been caused by seeing her brother, pistol in hand, glaring into the room. Then when he came charging madly forward, she stepped into his way with outstretched arms, and caught him around the neck. By the time he had shaken himself from her grasp the young man had got beyond pistol-range, and from the rate he was going, pursuit seemed hopeless.

"The cowardly villain!" panted the doctor, as he glared around him.

"He dared not stop. If he knows what is good for him he will never stop running until he gets out of the town. If I meet him again, within a mile of my house, I'll shoot him on sight. You can tell him so, with my compliments, if you see him again. And if you say another word to him I'll disown you."

The threat to herself had very little terror for Nina, since she did not believe in it; and she did not think that her lover had been cowardly at all. She knew that he would not have fled in that fashion if it had been any one but her father who—There was something so ludicrous in the affair that it was as much as she could do to keep from laughing.

Hilgarda was better posted on such things, and was a great more alarmed. Indeed, alarm was a very mild name to give to the horror she felt at what might have happened but for her interference. Of course she was under the impression that her brother had recognized the detective, and gone in to kill him off-hand. How desperate, then, must be his case! She did not

even attempt a remonstrance, but the instant that the danger was over, burst into tears.

That changed the humor of the doctor. He looked at the ladies angrily, and when he spoke it was grimly enough.

"It is no use to go into a discussion about this matter. I suppose that there is no danger of such a scandalous thing being repeated. If it is, I shall take less time to observe what is going on, and begin shooting earlier in the game. That settles it, and I want to hear not a word about it. Both of you will understand that I do not wish to hear that man's name repeated, and that I will listen to no remarks, suggestions, or explanations about him. It is a pity that our first day at home has been marred in this way, and perhaps it would be best for all hands to forget it entirely. Now, Nina, kiss and be friends. For this time we will be thankful that it was no worse."

That was rather more of a concession than Nina had looked for, and she gladly accepted the olive branch that was tendered without any demand for an explanation. She still had faith that she might be able to work a yet greater change in his mind if the young man would only keep out of sight until the doctor had time to cool. To give Morton a hint to that effect was what she desired to do, and already was she puzzling herself how to communicate with him, or in what garb she could expect to find him.

The doctor wanted to communicate with him, too, but with an entirely different object. He escorted the ladies to supper at an earlier hour than he would have otherwise done, and made some inquiries in regard to the young man.

Somewhat to his relief he found that he had been in the house, but had taken his departure a short time before.

"Sensible fellow," he thought. "He understands a gentle hint, and knows when it is time to leave. I hope we have seen the last of him."

And when Nina, with her father and aunt, sat down at the first supper-table, the first person that she saw was Dr. Levant, who was conversing confidentially with Ira Wickfield.

The sight of his partner operated as something of a mental shock on the doctor. He had been thinking of him as a far-away acquaintance, with whom he had some business relations; now he remembered him as the best of friends. According to custom, seats had been reserved, so as to bring them all together, and Farley shook hands with Ira most enthusiastically.

"Better late than never, old fellow. Been looking for you to turn up all day. Knew it was no use to go chasing you around all over the district. When you do get away, it takes a sleuth-hound to find you. Thought you might turn up at our ranch before we left it for the evening—guess we won't go back there to-night. Hardly feel settled yet, and I want to get my double-barreled shot-gun from Jones before I make a permanent thing of it. Have two young ladies to look after, and if I don't have the instruments with which to protect them, the eligibles of Broad Ax will be carrying them off before my very eyes without giving them a chance to pick or choose."

"To say nothing of the desperadoes that are not so eligible. Ha, ha!" laughed Ira, shaking the hand that grasped his with reciprocal enthusiasm.

When Dr. Levant reached over in much the same fashion, Farley was a trifle puzzled, but gave his hand all the same.

"Your face seems familiar," was what Farley said; "but hang me if I can call your name."

"Odd that," suggested Ira, who had again settled into his seat, after a nod from each of the ladies.

"I heard you speak of him often enough before you ever saw him; and after his services of last night, I should not have thought that you would have forgotten him. Why, man alive, if your own words went for anything, he saved your life."

"Don't be too blunt, Wickfield. You might re-awaken an interest, an interest in a matter that may as well be forgotten. Do not forget that it was the doctor who supplied both diagnosis and prescription. It was only my pleasant duty to apply the remedial agents. You can see yourself how thoroughly well he understood the case."

Levant settled his spectacles and shook his head gravely as he spoke. Ira did not understand as yet the peculiarity of his friend's mental condition since his apparent recovery. Some such caution was necessary. Meantime, at the mention of the name of Levant the eyes of the doctor brightened. He remembered very little about his condition the previous evening, but he did remember the name of the scientist, and the one work of his that he had once read with great interest. He did not trouble himself about the explanation to the professional service he was said to have received, but at once dashed into a conversation that left Ira entirely out in the cold—or he would have been there if Miss Hilgarda had not taken advantage of the opportunity, and gone in for monopolizing him herself.

Nina was very well satisfied with the way things were going. She watched the four with interest, and was at times almost sick from

suppressed laughter as she listened to her father accepting as law and gospel the positively expressed opinions of Morton Blackburn. She forgot the serious consequences that would be apt to follow if the deception was once exposed; and could not but admire the skill of her lover in disguise, and be astonished to find him as good a scientist as her father himself.

The supper was a secondary matter that evening, and after they had remained at the table as long as the assistants of Johnson would allow, and adjournment was made, first to the general room of the hotel, and then to the cottage. In spite of what Farley had said he preferred the cottage to the hotel for his headquarters.

Miss Hilgarda knew that her father and Mr. Wickfield had held some little conversation in regard to Nina. In her own heart she had doubts whether it would amount to any thing—this scheme to practically betroth two people who had never seen each other, even if one of them was a consenting party. She knew the sex too well.

However that might be, she did not consider that she had the right to interfere, so long as Nina had not shown a decided distaste to the arrangement. She was deeply indebted to her brother for both protection and support, and would not for the world appear ungrateful. So, though she found it very pleasant to talk with Mr. Wickfield, and there was no expression of dissatisfaction on Nina's face, she remembered that her brother might think she was poaching on what should be forbidden grounds should he happen to notice. With a mental sigh she turned the merchant over to her niece, in a way that savored very much of main force, and in a short time had withdrawn from the conversation, altogether. If she could have only guessed what was passing in the mind of the eminent scientist, whose attention appeared so thoroughly engaged elsewhere, she might have found some consolation for her own self sacrifice.

But Farley and Levant kept up the discussion on the Bacterian Theory of Disease, and Nina and the merchant were comparing notes on the route to Broad Ax. From being out of the conversation it was an easy transition to being out of the room. In the course of a half hour Hilgarda was walking alone in the little copse of trees, trying to calmly think over the events and revelations of the day. After the movement of the doctor on the discovery of Detective Garland in his house, there was doubtless little to hope from the mercy of the detective, yet she had a great desire to see him, and learn the state of his feelings toward her brother, and whether it could be possible, as she now began to suspect, that there was a personal reason for the positive hatred that Farley had displayed.

She was thinking over these things when she heard a footstep behind her, and a low, warning, "Hush!"

Hilgarda turned instantly, and found herself confronted by a man who had his finger on his lip, and advancing silently but confidently until he halted in reasonable distance for speaking.

She did not remember the man, though there was something familiar about his appearance, as well as about his voice when he spoke to her after being assured that she would listen.

"Excuse me, miss, for this unceremonious way of approach, for there is no time to lose, and as it will be impossible for Garland to make his appearance here after what has happened, he sends me, his partner, to talk the thing over. My name, by the way, is Orange Able."

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. GREENE RISKS A SHOT.

HILGARDA had never been brought into contact with Orange Able, and had seen him but once or twice, and that in a casual manner. His name had never been mentioned in her hearing and so it told her nothing. What she understood was that he was on the same scent as Garland, and was here to act as that detective's agent. If she had been wise of course she would have sent him to the right-about at once, or made her own escape without delay.

She was not wise, and she was romantic. She rather enjoyed the fact that her brother needed saving; and the idea that she was going to have something to do with the operation thrilled her all over. When Orange Able suggested that he had come to talk the matter over in the interests of Mr. Garland she was fascinated at once. She took him on trust, and imagined that here was the chance to accomplish the very thing that she had tried to suggest to her brother. The only difficulty was how, under her view of the case, she could, by any stretch of the imagination, deem him innocent. Perhaps, if he was carefully led up to it, Mr. Able might be competent to suggest that. Without start or shrink she answered:

"Although you and your name are strangers to me the mention of Mr. Garland is sufficient guarantee that you are a man who can be listened to with safety, and will hold all communications sacredly confidential. What is it that you wish to speak to me about?"

That was just what Orange did not know. He was on a general fishing excursion. If he

could find out anything about Farley it would suit his hand very well; and if he could only satisfy himself that Garland—if that well-known detective was actually in the camp—was after the doctor it would be a point gained.

"You understand, that it is best not to use any more names than is necessary," began Able. "Garland's great success has come from the fact that so little is known about him. Even here there is no telling who may be listening, and it may be as well to suppress all mention of names for the present, since we will both know of whom we are talking. You follow me?"

"Certainly, and I perfectly agree with you. Until we had come to some understanding I would not care to say anything definite myself. While I have every confidence in Mr.—in your friend—as a gentleman, as a professional man his duties no doubt cause him to employ means that, to the outside world, do not seem entirely fair. Of course, his word would be sufficient; but, until I had that, I should be foolish if I was not somewhat on my guard. Tell me truly, what has the detective come here to do?"

"Frankly, he has come here to arrest the doctor. Since then he has seen him and he has seen you; and I can tell you that he thinks perhaps there has been some mistake, and a little explanation might put him on a better trail. If the gentleman we are thinking of has been a criminal it seems likely there are others far deeper in the mire than he, and to capture them it might be policy to let him slip clear. Can you help us with any explanation?"

"I have not a doubt that you are correct. Indeed, he has as much as told me so, under circumstances that precluded any attempt at deceit. Unfortunately, I suspect there is some personal feeling between the two men, of which we know nothing. I can account for the warm reception of this afternoon on no other grounds. And your friend is certainly very magnanimous to overlook the unfortunate occurrence."

"Don't mention that," said Orange, with a chuckle at the recollection of the hasty departure of the young man.

"I saw the thing, and will have a joke on my friend for the next year; but then it was all in the way of business, and such things are never laid up against a man. It really works the other way. When you see a gent take such strong grounds it most frequently means that there has been a mistake of some kind, and we look a little out before going any further."

"Oh, I am so glad. I was afraid that he had made a mortal enemy forever. When I saw my brother coming in his hot wrath, I supposed that there would be death in the room before they both left it. There are few men that would have had the self-possession as well as the self-control to act as he did. From that moment I felt I could trust him."

"Trust Dan Garland to be cool in an emergency. It is his stock in trade. I was more surprised at the way the doctor panned out. His reputation in Broad Ax is that of a totally different kind of man. I do not think he was ever suspected of carrying a pistol before last night. And it seems to me there can be no half-way about him. Either he is an entirely innocent man, who can afford to take high grounds when a detective comes frolicking around him; or else he knows that to be taken back East is certain prison, if not death. I hope it is the former, and the very fact of Dan letting go when he had once tried to make his teeth meet is something like an assurance that it is. What did the doctor say when Garland went in for a talk? In the excitement it seems to have escaped his mind. And it would be a point for me to get an outside view."

"Oh, there was nothing said, at all. Brother Lucius came in with his revolver in his hand, and Mr. Garland went out."

The information that Orange was after did not seem to come very fast. He tried again, on a new tack:

"There is one contingency that we are both afraid of. Of course, with us, everything is a secret, and there is no danger of a word being said by us that would furnish a clue to outsiders. But it is important that we know that if we arrange this case, so that legal trouble shall not befall the doctor, no one will be able to bring it back to us. Our actions may be misunderstood and very unpleasant charges founded on them. The result might give him more trouble than the original charge, while making no end of unpleasantness for us."

"I do not think that I understand you," said Hilgarda, hesitatingly.

"Neither he nor I will be apt to refer to the matter when once it is settled; and if you do not speak of it what danger can there be?"

"You forget that there are clues that other men may follow, and there must be some one besides the doctor who knows, else how did you learn all?"

"Oh, you do not understand. Not a living soul had said a word to me when I spoke to Lucius. I could not help but see that something of the kind had to be on his mind, and it could be nothing else. When I taxed him with it he could do nothing but confess. I know nothing of the particulars, nor do I wish to. All that I desire is to see him safely out of the

trouble into which he has been recklessly drawn."

"In the name of Heaven what trouble do you suppose him in? You talk of it as though it was a terrible thing; and yet as though, because he has been reckless and because he is your brother, he should escape all punishment. Can't you understand the gravity of the position? I begin to believe that you do not yet know the worst."

"Oh, what can be worse?" wailed Hilgarda.

"To know that—"

"And then, never tell," broke in a laughing voice at her elbow.

"You really must excuse me, miss. I don't often chip into a game until I know what is the limit, but it seems to me this about suits my hand, anyhow, and I'll go in regardless. Steady, Mr. Able. My hand is in my pocket, and you ought to know what that means at your age. It goes without saying that if I pull you go down."

Orange recognized the tones in an instant, though the ring in them was entirely different from the drawl that he had listened to in the stage the previous day. Stephen Greene was again on the carpet, and this time in a new role.

It was too provoking, to say nothing of the danger. Another moment and he would have been in possession of the secret. No wonder that his hand made a swift movement toward his revolver, which was checked by the sharp click of the derringer in Mr. Greene's pocket. The words of the young man with a smile only served to confirm the belief that the drop was on him.

As the reader knows, Able was quick to read the signs of the times. The one lesson in front of the Western Continent was enough for him. He did not want to have any more trouble with the stranger, unless the advantages were all in his favor—and at present they were the other way. He saw that the chance of obtaining from Hilgarda the information he was after was over for the night, and he promptly took measures accordingly.

He paid no attention to the challenge of the young man, but, in a low tone, hastily spoke to Hilgarda:

"What I warned you of has happened. I will see you again. For the present be silent on all that has been said, and beware of this man, who is a snake in the grass."

Then Orange melted away from her side, so silently that she did not know when he went, and only the keen eyes of the man who had so opportunely come to what was really her rescue could mark how he took his departure.

There was no pretense about his going, however. The temptation to send back a shot, when once he thought himself concealed in the darkness, was strong, but fortunately for him he restrained himself, and Greene softly let the hammer of his derringer down as he saw that the danger was over for the present.

CHAPTER XVII.

"TILL TO-MORROW."

THE appearance of an outsider at the conference had been a thunderstroke to Miss Hilgarda. It heightened the romantic side of the picture, and she felt a little thrill creep up her spinal column as she heard the distinctly accentuated click of the derringer in Mr. Stephen Greene's pocket.

It was more than a surprise to see Mr. Able so quietly take his departure, without an effort to make a prisoner of the audacious intruder. When he was once gone she began to think of herself, and was turning away in something like trepidation when Mr. Greene spoke to her.

"Excuse me, miss, but as I was on my way to call on your brother I chanced to pass this way, and overheard what that scoundrel was saying. I wouldn't trust him for a cent, if I were you. He has rather a bad record for truth and veracity. And in case you think it is absolutely necessary, I would suggest that you have the doctor within hearing distance. His truth and veracity are away below par, and perhaps you know that it was a very near thing that I didn't shoot him myself, yesterday, for being too fresh. Farley will give you further particulars about the fellow if you ask him. My name is Greene—Stephen Greene. The doctor will probably give me a more formal introduction, and vouch for my reliability, if you think it advisable to inquire into it."

Very gravely did Stephen speak, and there was something in his voice that inspired her confidence and quieted her anger. She listened to him to the end, and by that time it began to dawn upon her that she might have made a mistake. In spite of the fact that he had certain knowledge that she would not have believed in the possession of any one save the man he represented himself to be, there was something in Able's abrupt departure that told against him. When Greene called him a scoundrel, she was at least ready to listen to further explanation.

"I am not certain that I should allow you to speak of the individual in his absence, or that I should thank you for interrupting an interview that was intended to be private and confiden-

tial. Of course I would not have allowed the interview if I had not had good reason to believe that he was a trustworthy man. If he is not I can see that you have done me a service. I shall make myself satisfied on that point before I speak with him again; and meantime, since you say that you are a friend of my brother, I feel that I have the right to ask you not to mention anything in regard to either of us as connected with this meeting. I will leave you now, to find your way to my brother alone. Should I meet you in his house, and should opportunity offer, I will then listen further to anything that you may have to say in the way of putting me on my guard against the individual who has just left our presence. I wish you good-evening, sir."

"All correct, miss. I think the doctor will indorse me as competent to give an opinion on the subject. I am not a saint myself, you understand; but I am what is called a square young man, and anything I may tell a lady will come very straight. Good-evening to you. I may see you later."

The conversation closed at that, and Hilgarda glided away. She made her way into the house quietly and found that her absence had hardly been noted. Her brother and Dr. Levant were still engaged in their professional discussion; while the conversation between Nina and Ira Wickfield was not languishing, in spite of the fact that Nina was keeping an ear toward the couple, and following the drift of their talk.

By the time that Hilgarda had fairly taken in the position of affairs, there was a knock at the door, and Stephen Greene was at it, inquiring for the doctor.

"Sorry, doctor, that I could not meet you sooner," was his greeting, as the doctor held out his hand in a cordial yet inquiring way.

"I understood it was a matter of business, and that's my best hold, every time. Only, I couldn't get around to it sooner. I'm very much here, now; but haven't long to tarry. What is the best word; or am I too late?"

Once more the doctor was forced to inwardly admit that there was something wrong with his memory. He remembered Greene well enough; but for the first moment or so could not recall what it was he wanted to see him for.

Greene noted the hesitancy, and put him on the right track.

"You didn't say in so many words, but I rather judged that it was something about the Red Horse Mine. I understand that you have a big interest there, and want a man that can look after things, and give you a show for getting back the worth of the money that has been put into that shaft."

That furnished up Farley's ideas, and he knew exactly what he wanted.

"If you are the man for my money, and no mistake, then you have struck about the size of it the first try. It's not a mining expert, exactly, that we want. From what I have seen of you I half-believe that you are the man we were looking for. Wickfield, here, is about as deep in the Red Horse as I am, and of course anything I may do is subject to his approval; but we generally agree pretty well. I wanted to get a refusal of your services until you could go out with me to the mine and talk the matter over. You understand that it is a place of some risk, and that the wages will be scaled accordingly?"

"That is all right. Wages are the things that bring a man to his work, and risk is no object. I suppose it is one man you want, that can do as much shooting as half a dozen ordinary laborers; and will always get it in where it will do the most good. You are taking a good deal for granted when you pick on me, but you haven't gone far wrong. 'Seven-Shot Steve' is a name that the boys at Bend Oak wouldn't have put on me if they hadn't thought it belonged. And they are as good judges down there as ever drew breath."

The doctor looked at the applicant for a situation with redoubled curiosity. Although his wits had gone wool-gathering, and his memory was so defective on all events that it was an effort to recall them until it was stirred, yet once on the right trail and Farley knew how the land lay as well as any one. He noticed the change in the young man, and was not altogether satisfied with it. There was very little modesty in the way that "Seven-Shot Steve" blew his own trumpet, and the doctor in substance told him so.

"There are two things that we want especially," he said, with a shake of the head and a frown.

"We want a man that is master of his weapons, and has judgment enough to know when to use them, and we thought observation had taught us that as far as that side goes you are our man. Again, we want a quiet, silent, almost taciturn sort of a man; and we thought that we had him in you. If we are mistaken in the one thing there is a chance that we have made a blunder in the other. Your ilk are all alike, in the matter of talk and tongue. It is a pity; for such a man as we thought you were could almost command his own price."

"There it is again. A fellow may keep his tongue still for a year, while it is not his put in;

and then, when some one tells him to open up to bed rock if he wants to reach a good thing, and he does it for that time only, all the rest goes for nothing, and they set him down for a braggart, or a fellow that would sooner fight than eat. Honestly, I am not a man of either kind. I simply profess to be able to hold my hand anywhere, and at anything. It's not often that I say that much, either; but when there is money on your knowing it, and there is no one else to tell you, I have got to talk, or lose the job. I haven't a word more to say about myself, and what I can do. If you want to know the balance you must ask some one else that knows, or try me—anywhere and everywhere that you choose. Good-evening. You know where I am stopping, and when you make up your mind, let me know."

Greene did not put a shade of anger, or of impudence into his tone; but he spoke like a man that knew himself, and was telling the truth the same as if he was speaking of another man. He had got around to almost the guilelessness of manner, if not of matter, that he had shown in the stage, under the inquisitorial fire of Orange Able's conversation.

"There, there! That will do. I see I have hurt you in a tender spot, and apologize accordingly. I do not fancy men with high-sounding pseudonyms, as a rule; but if you are as good as yours—and I believe you are—it shows that you are more than we thought, the man for us. I will see you at the hotel to-morrow, and we can talk it all over. If you then want the place, I feel pretty sure it will be yours. I had no idea of business to-night, and will not go a step further if it breaks our firm. Sit still, though. We were just having an interesting conversation. Doctor Levant and I—perhaps you have met him?"

"Not in the flesh, but I once had the pleasure of reading a work of his, on the Bacterian Theory of Disease, and am highly gratified to meet the distinguished author."

The sport acknowledged the introduction, and accompanied his unexpected statement with a bow that would have done credit to Chesterfield himself. He even looked unconscious, when it was in danger of being interrupted by a laugh from Nina, who, to cover what might seem an impertinence, looked quizzically at Levant, as she said:

"We have found another of your students, have we? Either Broad Ax is an exceptional place, or the name of your readers must be legion. I begin to take an interest in this work myself. What is the Bacterian Theory of Disease, and is there really anything amusing about it? I shall send for a copy by the first mail—for I understand that father has lost or mislaid his."

"Don't bother the doctor with your foolish nonsense," interrupted Farley. "If you had been listening, you might have gathered from what we have been saying that it is a scientific work a little beyond you, and that you would not get beyond the first page if you undertook its perusal. I am not willing to admit that my copy is lost, either. It was about a week or so ago, and has only been mislaid. I will look for it to-morrow, and show the doctor the passages he thinks I have misunderstood."

"I hope it will be found, if only for your own confusion, though I have my doubts," laughed Nina.

The doctor would either have opened his eyes or have been furiously angry if he had known with what certainty she was making the assertion. The work in question was reposing on the tray of Nina's trunk. She seldom lost her head, and though the Doctor Levant scheme had been sprung so suddenly upon her, she had an eye to contingencies, immediately. It was possible that Dr. Levant's ignorance of his own work might open Farley's eyes, and accordingly, she took the first opportunity to steal the volume away. She need not have taken the trouble, for when Morton Blackburn assumed the character he made himself letter perfect in all that pertained to it, and it would have been hard to catch him napping, unless it might seem so when it came to discussing points which he had modified to suit his own ideas of the fitness of things.

To Nina's jest the doctor growled some answer, and then turned to his guests recalled to Levant's mind the point at which they were when interrupted, and the conversation went on.

Ira Wickfield was out of his depth, and had nothing to say; but to the surprise of every one Seven Shot Steve joined in with an emendation or rather an addition to the theory, that was apparently a legitimate result; and supported it both by reasoning and quotations from the work in question. And he got so far advanced, finally, as to show that original sin was only a case of blood-poisoning that was inherited, and might be aggravated, or augmented into an acute attack by contact with some one who had a surplus stock of the right sort of microbes on hand. Greene did not talk long, but while he was at it, it rather seemed as though he held up his view of the case as well as any or all of them.

"Till to-morrow," he said, as he took his leave; and he cast a glance at Hilgarda, that said to her that the words were as much for her benefit as that of the doctor.

"Till to-morrow," whispered Levant in Nina's ear, as he took his leave not very long thereafter. "Then keep a friendly eye out for Ah Chung."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TREASURE AT DR. FARLEY'S.

If it had not been for Dr. Farley's desire to spend a few days, or the greater part of them, at home, he would not have been in quite so much haste to get a superintendent for the Red Horse claim. The house was a new toy, and he intended to exhaust its resources at once—and perhaps be done with them. For this reason, he started out from the table of the Continent to hunt up Mr. Greene, who had his breakfast some time before Farley and his party put in appearance.

He found his man, and picking up Ira at the store, the three went out to the mine, leaving to the ladies the unobstructed care of further arranging things at the house. When the doctor returned at a late hour he found a notice in the office of the hotel that he was expected at his own domicile for dinner.

"All right, for once in a while," thought he.

"It won't do to put the cares of such a *cuisine* as we demand on the shoulders of a young girl just from school; and I doubt if Hilda knows, in their natural state, peas from potatoes. But for a day or so it will no doubt seem fun; and in the mean time something in the way of a man or maid servant may turn up. If not, we can take our meals with Johnson until some arrangement can be made. From what he tells me a Chinaman is of course impracticable!"

So reflected Dr. Farley, to himself, as he strolled homeward. When he arrived there he found that, practicable or not, the Chinaman was there. He caught a glimpse of him, pigtail, blouse and all, frisking around in the kitchen, and had he followed his first impulse he would have immediately kicked him out of doors, as a possible breeder of trouble in the future.

"Hello," he exclaimed, as he skipped into the front room, with the boyish exuberance that he had at times shown since the operation.

"Where are all my handmaidens? I'm ready for dinner, with an appetite that is simply immense, and I warn you that if the supply is short, or the cookery fails to come up to the standard, I will close the doors, and go off to the Western Continent. I am in no condition for experiments that are failures."

"Here we are, papa. Ah Chung has not yet the run of the house, so we will leave him in the kitchen for the present, where he seems to be invaluable. Hilgarda can help to carry in the dishes, if she knows nothing else of the duties of housekeeping; and I will look after things between here and there. In a day we will have it all running like clock work; and in a week you will be wondering that you ever were satisfied to live in any other way."

"That's the style of youthful enthusiasm that generally exhausts itself in a day. By to-morrow you will both be willing that I should carry in the dishes myself. A little later, Ah Chung will be suggesting that I should wash them. You had better not spoil the heathen in the start, or no one will ever be able to make anything out of him. I would sooner give him a little more than he can do to-day, and accept his resignation this evening. It is very comfortable to live under your own vine and fig tree; but if Ah Chung is to sit there along with you, there may be some danger about it, too. How did you come to find him?"

"We didn't find him at all. He found us. At least, he appeared here this morning, and stated that he had been told that we were in search of a Chinaman to do general housework, and preside in the kitchen. He wanted 'big wages,' as you say out here; but with us money was no object, so long as we got the kind of person that we wanted. We at once took him on trial."

"And does he suit, so far?" asked the doctor, with a gleam of hope.

"Just too lovely for any use. He is willing, and able to do almost anything in the way of housekeeping. When you have eaten the dinner that we shall have the pleasure of setting before you I think you will agree with me in pronouncing him a treasure."

The doctor groaned.

"I only hope that you will be able to induce the committee to be of the same opinion."

"The committee! And pray, what committee do you mean? It is rather soon in the course of our experience to hazard a state dinner; but if it is actually necessary, no doubt Ah Chung and I can rise to the occasion. Only give us plenty of time for consultation—his pidgin English is not the easiest thing to understand—and we will undertake to entertain King William himself."

"No doubt; but this is King Mob, who is of vastly more importance to us than the gentleman in Germany. Johnson has just been telling me that a Celestial could not be obtained in Broad Ax for love or money. They are not allowed to remain within its precincts for more than an hour on pain of the rope; and the sentence of the court has been carried out in more cases than one. I am desirous of decorating these grounds of ours as fast as time and money will allow; but I declare, I do not care to begin by hanging Chinamen to my trees."

Nina gave a little scream, that was not altogether of surprise. She had heard of the Chinese question, and that the West was coming to the conclusion that the Chinese must go; but she had not hitherto understood the meaning of the phrase. Here it was, brought home to her in a way that she could understand, and with an application that was verging on the personal. If this was not a joke of her father's, and he did not look as though it was at all a joking matter, she ought to give the Celestial in the kitchen warning and send him out of the town, since he was in such danger during every moment that he remained.

"Oh, it is really a screaming matter, I assure you. This fellow must be a new importation, and unaware of the high moral tone that pervades this camp. It is ten to one that there is an indignation meeting being held now. They will suppose that we are sinning through ignorance, and will no doubt wait a little while to see if they cannot catch our Chinaman off of our grounds, when they can give him an hour to leave the camp. If that chance does not come within a reasonable time, there will be a call in force; and if we should try to check the popular uprising, not even my personal popularity, which I assure you is not small, would be allowed to stand in the way. We would most likely be sent out of the burg along with him. Private inconvenience must not be suffered to count when it stands conversely with popular and public reform."

Nina gave a sigh of resignation.

"I suppose that there is nothing for us to do, then, but to go back to the table of the Western Continent. I cannot allow the little fellow to sacrifice himself for our comfort; and if you are sure that the committee would not listen to reason, and allow us to run our domestic affairs to suit ourselves, I must tell Ah Chung how it is, pay him a week's wages to take him to some less regenerate camp, and let him go—if he will."

"If he will? The fellow will only be too glad to go. A week's wages for the work of a day will be the foundation of a little fortune. If he can strike a few more families that will treat him as generously he will be ready to go back to China-side, and set up for a prince. You hardly suppose that he has grown so attached to us all that he would risk his life to remain?"

Her father spoke with a contempt for her folly so profound that Nina was half inclined to grow angry; it is not certain that she did not blush a little. So far, Ah Chung, with his queer lingo and outlandish ways, had been something of a mystery to her. As she had been unable to meet him save in the presence of Hilgarda, she had been unable to decide whether he was or was not an old friend in a new garb. If he was, then the disguise was more perfect than she could have imagined. If he was not, and she could be once assured of it, her anxiety would not be so great. The heathen might be trusted to take care of himself, and it would not seem so important to get him off the premises before the committee actually arrived.

So she had been reasoning; but when Dr. Farley spoke as he did there was an inward change. There might be some risk

about it, but she would show her father that her judgment of mankind was better than he thought; and would take the chances.

But she disclosed none of her thoughts as she answered:

"I don't suppose anything more about it, and won't until our dinner is over. Then you can say yourself if it is worth while to take any risks to retain our treasure. You have frightened Hilgarda out of her next year's growth already, so I forbid the further discussion of the subject for the present, and am very sorry that we have been wasting so much valuable time. In another five minutes the dishes will be cold. Be ready to enjoy our triumph. In a moment we will have everything on the table. Come, Hilgarda. We will act as the waiter, and see if we cannot do it without any sacrifice of our dignity. Ah Chung will be coming on a voyage of discovery to see what keeps us, if we do not relieve his mind soon."

Off went the two, leaving the doctor to shake his head and wonder whether this daughter of his was not going to be a great deal of trouble to him before he got her entirely accustomed to western ways.

Before the doctor had finished his reflections regarding Nina's willfulness, that young lady and her aunt were back once more, with their hands full of the good things that had been prepared in the kitchen, and when Farley, who had both taste and appetite, had seated himself at the table, and taken in the first installment, he began to wonder if the laws of Broad Ax were like those of the Medes and Persians, or whether it might not be worth his while, even, to agitate the repeal of the obnoxious statute that threatened to deprive him of the services of a domestic so valuable as Ah Chung really was.

By the time the meal was finished the doctor was in a frame of mind that made him loth to part with his newly-found *attache*.

"I'll apologize in any terms that you ask," he said, in answer to the laughing question of how he had enjoyed his dinner.

"And I have a desire to question this treasure, which the world of Broad Ax would be willing to bury in a napkin—or something harder. I must explain to him, if he does not already know of them, the local regulations that may cause his remaining here to end in an unpleasantness. After that, if he fancies to make my house his castle, I am not sure that I will not be willing to help him defend it. Bring him in, if you please, and let me see what he looks like."

The demand was something that Nina had been for some time dreading. She did not believe that her father's eyes were any sharper than her own, but there might be some little tag, which she had overlooked, that might disclose his identity—if he had any. After that she knew well enough what an explosion would follow.

CHAPTER XIX.

HILGARDA PENETRATES A DISGUISE.

OF course there was no possible objection that could be urged, and sooner or later the doctor was bound to see the Chinaman, anyway. Perhaps it was best to have the meeting over and done with. At present, and after a dinner such as Dr. Farley had just been helping to discuss, he would not be likely to have the shadow of a suspicion, nor would he be apt to entertain one, if it came flying around, looking for an open door to enter. If any one had told him that Morton Blackburn had cooked that dinner, Farley would have set that man down as a fool. If the same statement was made when the impression through the gastric organs had become dimmed somewhat by lapse of time he might think that it was worth while to investigate it.

So Nina argued within herself, but she went away very bravely, and with an air that might have betrayed her if there had been anything in the world to suggest her secret.

"What in the world is the matter with Nina?" thought the doctor, as he noticed a certain look in the face that he could not quite understand.

"She acts as though I had some designs on the life of the rascal—as though I was going to save the committee all trouble, by doing its work before it arrives. Perhaps I

have been speaking harshly with her without knowing it. The child does not know me as Hilgarda does; and somehow I am not exactly myself, either. I can't see that there is anything wrong; but somehow I feel it, all the same. Ah, here is the Celestial. For a little fellow, he certainly has considerable bigness."

Ah Chung came in with a hop, skip and a jump, after the usual manner of progression employed by his race when in a hurry. He stopped half-way between the door and the table, shook his cue, and made a low salaam.

"Ah Chung hap cooksee one piecey chow-chow allee samee 'Melican style, gleet plenty. T'at him larn-pidgin do since he come from China-side. You no likee, him belley solly. What for you ask see Ah Chung? My must do my duty juss as my can. Mississee say she tly Ah Chung. He numpa one kukman he givve he plenty much cash piecee, galow. T'at belly plop, heh, ch'hoy?"

The principal anxiety of Ah Chung seemed to be to know whether his meal had given satisfaction, though he was not above finding out whether the bargain as made by Nina was going to hold good with the proprietor, whom he now saw for the first time. The doctor had a fair idea of his meaning, and shook his head gravely. He had little doubt that Ah Chung could understand him as well if he employed plain English, as if he undertook to furbish up his Pidgin English, which had grown sadly rusty through lack of use.

"As far as plain cookery goes you suit us well enough, and I should be happy to keep you in my house at the wages offered by my daughter. I do not know what she has promised, but have no doubt it would be what was reasonable on both sides. As it is a plain cook, and not a coachman, that we think of engaging, it is not so necessary to keep an eye on her bargains. But the trouble is, Ah Chung, that this is not altogether a land of liberty, after all, and we must keep an eye out for the drift of public opinion and conform to it. For your own sake I am afraid that we cannot keep you in our house, though I would have no hesitation in giving you a recommendation to any one else that wanted just such a servant as we were in search of. I opine that you are a stranger in Broad Ax, and not aware that men of your race are not allowed to remain within its borders? It has been at the peril of your life that you have been here thus long. I am sorry to part with you, but you must go. There will be a necktie party organized in no time to reason the case with you as soon as your presence becomes known, and you had better take time by the forelock by going at once. This will pay you for your disappointment, and help you on your way to some other camp where they are not so particular."

Farley thought he saw the eyes of the Chinaman twinkle as he produced the ten-dollar bill that he tendered him in conclusion, and was surprised when the Celestial folded his arms, with his hands altogether concealed, and shook his head violently.

"Ah Chung hearlo allo 'bout t'at. No can care. S'posey Bload Ax no like, s'posey Bload Ax come, kickee up bobbely, t'en Ah Chung lay low. Him hidee head. No can find. Go 'way. T'en Ah Chung come back, allee samee befoh' tim'. Him cooksee plenty much, he catche plenty tin tolla, ebley t'ing be lovely. Him takee allee lisk, ebley tim'."

"That's not so bad for an uncivilized heathen; but while you are taking the risk we will be getting the worry. And after a couple of calls without getting the worth of their money, the boys will be burning the house over our heads. They must have some fun, you know."

"You too plenty 'flaid. Ah Chung gottee pull one too muchee bad man. Fix allo t'at. Be allo lightee, ebley timee."

He spoke too earnestly not to believe what he was saying, and Dr. Farley hesitated. He did not think that Ah Chung could have a "pull" on any one of influence in the town, but it was possible for him to have made arrangements for early intelligence of any movement that was contemplated. In that case he might be able to escape in the brief time allowed while the army that usually took such matters in hand was organizing.

It was not the pleasantest thing in the world to employ a man whom every one else was wanting to hang; but then it was not the pleasantest thing in the world to board at the Western Continent, after once having had a taste of the possibilities of home comforts. With sudden resolution the doctor spoke:

"You say that you are willing to take your chances, and that you fully understand what that means. Very well. I won't say how long I will be able to stand what may be the consequences to me, but, for the present I will stand by you. If it grows too interesting, and I have to get rid of you, I will make it all right, so far as wages go, and a well ordered funeral in case there is any call for it. That will do. My daughter will give you your orders, and if the outside world will let us alone I have no doubt that we can get along very amicably. You may retire."

Ah Chung expressed his delight at this decision, and went out with a duplicate of the hop, skip and jump with which he had entered. For the present the un-civil service reformers of Broad Ax were to be defied; and both servitor and served seem to be rather pleased over the prospect.

There was another thing which both surprised and delighted the doctor. The ladies had offered no suggestions, but had allowed him to arrange matters to suit himself. Had he known the reasons which actuated them he might have been a little more surprised, and considerably less delighted.

Nina was in an agony of fear lest the identity of the Chinaman might be brought into question. It was one thing for her lover to be supporting the character of a savant who had made a reputation for himself; and another to have him unmasked when playing the role of a "heathen Chinee."

And Hilgarda had a theory of her own.

"Well," said Farley, with a sigh of relief; "I suppose that it will not last long, but if the boys show half-way decency we may have the benefit of Ah Chung in the kitchen until we can get some one to take his place. Of course, unless there is a radical change in public feeling, this can only be temporary. Whenever our heathen is inclined to take a day off he will hear of a committee meeting, and skip accordingly. But if, meantime, he will prepare two-thirds of the meals after the style of to-day it will be the best arrangement we could hope for at the present."

"Well, well, father mine, if you only have been as successful getting a superintendent to your liking as we have a cook, it will be fair to say that the age of miracles has not yet passed. What did you and Mr. Greene decide on?"

"Humph!" answered the doctor. "I am afraid that the beds of neither will be roses, for a time at least. Mr. Greene and Ah Chung are practically in the same boat; and it is hard to say which will probably depart this life first. Stick to your kitchen, young lady—or at least, to the things that pertain to it. The affairs of the Red Horse are not the things that you should pry into. By the way, I think of inviting Levant to dinner to-morrow, and if he accepts the invitation, it is dollars to dimes that our Chinaman will turn up missing, or that we have a call from some of our representative citizens. In that case, I think I will have to see what you can do yourselves. Now, I will take myself off, and if I do not return at a practicable hour do not sit up for me."

Away went the doctor. Nina's eyes followed him out of the room with a quizzical sort of expression, and it was hard work to keep from telling him how thoroughly she agreed with him in his belief that Ah Chung and the savant would not appear on the same carpet at once. When she looked around she saw that Hilgarda had been regarding her attentively, and felt her face flush under the inspection.

"Oh, Nina dear," whispered her aunt, "do you think that he suspects?"

The question almost staggered the young lady, but she had presence of mind enough to answer one awkward question by asking another.

"Suspects, dear? What do you mean? What is there to suspect?"

"Have you not seen? Our Chinaman is a fraud, and no Chinaman at all. Can you not see?"

"Then, in the name of wonder, who is he?" asked Nina, recklessly.

"A detective, who is here with designs upon your unsuspecting father. What shall we do about it?"

The relief was so great that it was hard to keep from laughing. What had started Hilgarda on this tack was a mystery, but it was better than having her suspect the truth, and Nina was not at all desirous of having her undeceived. She held up her finger to enjoin silence, as she answered in a whisper:

"Hush! It may be a mistake, though I had a glimmering idea that something of the kind might be the case. We cannot, we dare not do anything. Our only hope is to be silent and watch. Our time may come."

CHAPTER XX.

THE WAY THE DOCTOR MET SUSPICION.

THE doctor went around to his office, where he remained some time. In the dusk he had a caller, whose appearance was unexpected. Just as he was about to leave, Orange Able came in.

The visitor was willing to make himself agreeable at the start, though he had not come there without a purpose. He had put aside the bullying look that the doctor had thought was habitual with him, and was fresh and smiling. In that guise he was in all the more dangerous mood, as the doctor reflected, and the latter was on the lookout for mischief at once.

Orange began at a great distance from his objective point.

"I am not so altogether a stranger that I have to apologize for a friendly call," he began, taking the seat toward which the doctor motioned him.

"But there is something else that perhaps I ought to say a word about. It is just possible that I did not behave according to drawing-room requirements the other day, when we were coming over in the hearse. If I had known that the young fellow was a friend of yours, or that it was likely that he was going to be, I would have held off from him. If you had only given me a nod or a wink I would have let him alone. But I was in what they call a rank bad humor, and felt that if I did not let off a little steam somehow I would burst for sure. I don't know that I was fooled too much on the fellow, though I'll own I had no idea that he could be such a little section of chain lightning. I suppose I got about what I deserved, and I have been keeping quiet about it. You understand; I am not apologizing to him. Whenever he is anxious to start the ball again I will be meeting him something over half-way. But out of consideration for you I am willing to drop it right here, and to give you my word that I regret exceedingly if I occasioned either you or the young lady in your charge any unpleasant feeling."

It was a little odd to hear him talk, there was such a mixture of character. He almost interested the doctor. Either he had been at one time something of a gentleman and lapsed into a rough; or he was a rough who at one time or another had made some efforts to seem a gentleman. But for a chief to come around, talking after this manner, showed that he had some ulterior design that he thought of considerable importance. As Farley believed him to be dangerous all the time, he felt inclined to handle the man cautiously.

"Don't say anything more about it. Of course, as far as I was concerned it made no difference. My daughter is not accustomed to our ways out here, and was a little alarmed until I got a chance to tell her it was all right. If you have a grievance with Greene, and some day come to a settlement, that is his affair. Honestly, I think he is just as able to take care of his own safety as any man I ever saw. If he can't, so much the worse for him. Because he is manager at the Red Horse will not be reason enough to make me take a hand in his private affairs. I would not stand by and see a crowd on him; and I would give him warning if I thought any man was going to shoot him in the back. Outside of that I should take no interest in any of his engagements."

"Foreman at the Red Horse, is he?"

The intelligence was a surprise to Orange Able.

"I didn't know that you wanted a man

there. Thought you were going to reduce the force, and tie up work until things got straight. It may be that the thing will go dead against you; and then everything you put in will be so much lost. Riley is a bad man to crowd, and he claims that the Red Horse lays right over his "War Chief," and you and he are getting ready to fight it out on that line. That's the way I got it, and I guess its about as straight as a string."

"I don't know where you got your information, unless from Riley himself, but leaving out of account the merits of the case that is the way it stands. Riley may be a bad man to crowd; but at present he is doing all the crowding himself. If you had owned the Red Horse, for instance, there would have been none of this trouble, which, since my return, I find is brewing."

"That's so, Doc. If a man tried to float the corner of his claim around on to me I would cook him for good and all. And Riley knows it, too. He has just laid out that you and Wickfield are two pretty good fellows, that don't know the value of an ace full when you hold it, and would rather be bluffed off, anyhow. He wouldn't try it on any one that he thought would shoot. How would you like a partner in the thing, who would take that part of the business off your hands? I don't want to put in much coin; but I can furnish lots of something else."

"Thanks for the offer, and if it had come before we made our arrangements I do not know but what we may have taken the subject into pretty serious consideration. Now, it is too late."

"Don't be too sure of that, Doc. You might just make the everlasting mistake of your lifetime. I am just the man that can do you good; and if everything I hear is true, that's the sort of hairpin you are needing at this blessed moment. If you don't get me maybe the other side will; to say nothing of the points I could give to Dan Garland."

The change of base was as sudden as it was surprising, and it took the doctor all aback. He was not alarmed so much as he was dumfounded. What did Orange Able know about Dan Garland, and his mission to Broad Ax?

Able saw the confusion of the doctor, and thought that he had only to press his advantage to gain a decided victory.

"Don't go to making any mistake about me, doctor. I only want things made pleasant and comfortable. When Orange Able makes up his mind, things have got to come his way or something breaks. You must know that I have been more or less playing a part in this town. It suited me to set up for a chief, and a chief I was. If I had thought it worth my while to figure as a gospel sharp I would have been 'way up on the top of the heap, just the same. When I want to settle down as a retired millionaire I will do it, and if I pitch my tents on the most aristocratic corner of Madison Square, there will be no one yelling "shoddy" at me. I will show just as blue blood and thoroughbred style as any of them. I like you and I like your style. Take me in on the ground floor with you and you have a backer that it is hard to get away with. If anything unpleasant turns up I'll see you through. Wickfield means well enough, but he ain't got the sand to stand by you if the cards run rough; and between you and me that's the sort of a man you are going to need before very long. There's no time to waste; what do you say to it?"

If Able had said all that was on his tongue to say, it is possible that he would never have left the office of the doctor alive. As it was, he had said enough to make Lucius Farley dangerous.

And all the more dangerous was he because Orange, in spite of the partial revelation of the night before, so thoroughly misunderstood him. His lips were tightly closed, and if it had not been so dark in the little office Able would surely have seen that danger was coming. Before he could guess at it, or even notice the ominous silence with which his proposition was being considered. Before he knew it the fingers of the doctor had closed on his shoulder. After that there was no help for him.

Still silent the doctor gathered his man up with a strength that made Able think rather of a machine than a human being. When it

was too late Orange tried to struggle. He might as well have tried to escape the clutch of a cable grip.

Just one heave and the fellow was out of the chair and half way to the door. Then he felt the fingers loosen, and he went flying over the threshold, with his hands to the spot where the doctor's foot had done good service, before he entirely let go his hold.

"Take that for your answer," growled the doctor, to himself rather than to Able.

"Blest if I don't think that the whole town is a little off their base, and I know there has a kink got into me somehow, but I am not just so low down as to make a pard of Orange Able. He can hunt Dan Garland up, and be hanged to him. I have given him a satisfactory answer, anyhow."

CHAPTER XXI.

ALL CHUNG HEARS THE LAW EXPOUNDED, AND AGREES TO ACCEPT A SHARE IN THE PROFITS.

FARLEY knew well enough when he kicked Orange Able into the street that he was making a dangerous enemy; but while he was in his present mood, he did not care. As the Dr. Farley of a month ago, he would have thought twice before allowing himself to be put in the way of a shoot-on-sight street-fight with such a professional fire-eater as Able. As the Dr. Farley of the present, he did not care what consequences might follow his act. And whatever they might be, he was a hundred times more likely to protect himself now than he was then, since he had no desire to shrink from the meeting. With that spirit to the fore, and a strength and skill of no mean order, unknown though it had been for so long to Broad Ax, he had a right to believe that his chances would be at least even.

Orange did not think it was worth while to stop to argue with the doctor. He did not even howl back to him the threats that were just bubbling over in his brain. Fortunately, the street was at that moment deserted, so that no one saw his downfall, and he could stride away unnoticed. By the time that he had reached the end of the street he was a good deal calmer, and able to put his threats in some sort of shape. Then he talked the matter over to himself, and came to the conclusion that he would have to try some other plan to get even with Farley.

"Confound him, if he flamed up like that just because I spoke about going into partnership, what would he have done if I had gone the whole figure and shown him the cards that are in the box? I don't quite know how to take him. I'll swear that there is a secret, and that he is afraid that Dan Garland is after him; but I don't know much about it, and I am afraid he thinks I don't. Otherwise would he have gone for my necktie after such a fashion? Unless he is in a box, and would sooner go out of the damp by Orange Able's revolvers than by Dan Garland's rope.

"But then, the way he came for me shows that he knows how to handle himself. Broad Ax has been fooled on the man, and mighty bad fooled. He has been laying low here, but I'll bet a heap that he was a sport where he came from—and it's even money that it was a shooting mess that he got into there that Garland is following him for.

"But he must be a deep one, and have left no proof against himself, or there would have been no fooling around the bush. Garland would have had the irons on and his man over the mountain long before this if he had anything of a sure case to go on. The old fraud must have known that there was nothing that could be known, unless he first gave it away; and as he is up to the fact that Dan has him under suspicion he don't care a continental what I say.

"But I'll have the old badger yet. The day I have the facts of his secret I'll have him, and if that fool of a woman talks around much more on the loose it is as like as not that she will put me on the right string. It's too late for me to play my game out with her, and I would just as soon as not she told her brother all about the interview. I'll have some one inside of the doctor's house, to pick points, before another day goes 'round, and if it's not that Chinaman they seem to be going to take on you can call me a bald-headed Dutchman. I can

hold off the boys as long as I want to use him, and then maybe, make a point by having the house swept. And the divine Nina— If I don't have an interview with her inside of twenty-four hours it will be because I have lost cheek and cunning; or, he has put her in a box. With wealth and beauty in the distance it is time that Orange Able turns back the leaf once more, and becomes again a gentleman."

That there would have to be a change a good deal more than skin deep to accomplish that last did not seem to trouble the man a particle. He was more than brazen in his nature; and as he went down the street with a strong, confident stride, no one would have suspected from his looks that Dr. Farley had just kicked him out of his office.

The residence of the doctor had more than ever an attraction for the chameleon. Though he had not intended it when he left the vicinity of the office, his footsteps pointed that way of their own accord, and before he knew it he was wandering around the house in the darkness, casting envious glances at the windows from which the light of the parlor lamps was shining. He shook his fist at Ira Wickfield, when that gentleman stood at the door and knocked; and ground his teeth together with an angry gnash when he saw him admitted.

As this thing was neither pleasant nor profitable it was not likely that Orange would keep it up long. He was in fact just about turning away when he saw some one come out at the back door, turn a key carefully in the lock, give a glance at the same parlor windows that he had been surveying for the last five minutes, and then step slowly off in the direction of the ford that led across the river to Hard Hack Gulch.

"Luck my way, at last," muttered Able, as he recognized the dress and step of a Chinaman.

"It's the doctor's heathen. If the cuss has half-sense, and can get it into his head what I want, I can use him. If I can't, it won't be so hard to kill him, either. Let's see how the land lays, anyhow."

Ah Chung was skipping slowly along, in blissful ignorance of the fact that he was being watched, though he did not at all want to hide from public observation. He knew well enough that his being at the house could not long be kept a secret; and he desired that it should be known that he left it every evening when his work was done. It might save the doctor—and Nina—an unpleasant visit.

A heavy hand upon his shoulder caused him to look up and behind him, and there was a sudden jerk of the flowing sleeve that covered his left wrist that might have made Able suspicious if he had seen it, but for the moment his attention was directed to the other hand. Though he did not expect any serious resistance from the Chinaman, it was contrary to his custom to take too much for granted. He had twice, lately, departed somewhat from that rule, when dealing with Stephen Greene and the doctor, and the result had put him, as he thought, more than ever on his guard. If he had known how quick Ah Chung had caught the drop on him he would hardly have spoken quite as insolently at his ease.

"Not quite so fast, John. I want to have a little serious talk with you. Do you know it is against the law for you to be in Broad Ax taking the bread out of the mouths of our free-born American citizens who depend on the labor of their hands to support them and their families? Unless you can show me a very good reason for being here, I am afraid, John, that you will have to go."

"Me no John; me Ah Chung. Me no takee bleed outee 'Melican mouthee; me bakke bleed. Me kukman. Me stlanger heah. What foah you say Ah Chung must go?"

"If you are a cook-man, so much the worse. You will have a dozen of your brethren here who are something else in just no time at all. The law in Broad Ax says that any Chinese gentleman found in its limits is to be shot on sight, or otherwise executed, as may be most convenient. And I think the most convenient way would be to blow the top of your head off. It is not worth the trouble to call the town together on the case."

With a flourish, Able brought his revolver

in line with Ah Chung's head and drew back the hammer.

If the consternation that followed was not real it was acted to the life. The Chinaman doubled all up until he seemed to diminish about one-half in size, and he held up his hand with an imploring gesture.

"What foah you do t'at? Ah Chung he no likee fo-yak. You no so iron facee you do t'at. My more betta go 'way. What too muchee plenty nipt cash g'low so he losee al'o blains? He be outsidee Broad Ax fatee-fatee, too quick. Look-see! Allo one-tim him be cohom; allo 'notta tim he no eehom."

"Don't doubt it a bit, Chinee. If I let you off this time you won't be caught here again; but that isn't the thing. If you don't come here you will go somewhere else. Guess I may as well finish the job. If you know anything about prayers, you might as well murmur a few, for I am going to start you over the range in just one minute by the clock."

The pistol-barrel that was pointed for Ah Chung's head seemed to settle into a still more direct line. If Ah Chung knew anything about the history of his nation in the flower-flag land he knew that more causeless killings had been done, and that it was not even money that the whole thing was a joke. He looked around in a wolfish way, as if he was in a box, and was looking for a line of retreat. Orange Able never knew how it was that a doubt saved his life just then. The derringer in Ah Chung's left sleeve was perilously near to speaking.

Orange saw the movement that looked like an attempt to escape; he did not see the business with the hammer of the derringer. It was no part of his plan to keep up this interview too long. He had enough of interruptions the night before. He changed his base.

"Hold on, heathen. It may be that I can let you slip, and perhaps see you through the ripple. You have a pretty good thing of it at the doctor's house, and would like to stay there, eh?"

"You bette," answered Ah Chung with a terse fervor, that was genuinely natural. He did not say, however, that he would like to stay there as cook.

"Well, Chinee, if I pass the word around not one of the boys will interfere. I run things here. Do you think you can understand a little straight talk?"

"Ah Chung undtstand, allo timee."

"It's this way, then. If ever you say a word about this you are a dead heathen. The boys are just itching to go for you, but I am holding them back. I want you to stay right where you are, in the doctor's house; and I want you to stay there as my man. I want you to hear what I tell you to hear, and do what I tell you to do. There is big money in it if you treat me square, and death in it if you don't. You understand that?"

"Me savvy, belly much good, allee samee he talkee China-fashion. If la-li-lung come Ah Chung shuttee eye. He no see t'ief mans. Eh, c'boy?"

"Confound you, no. I'm not in the thief line myself. I want you to come out here at this time every evening and let me know what is going on inside. I want you to keep your ears open, and tell me what you hear. I might get a fellow that could tell me better what he picked up, but you are on the ground, and if you are half as sharp as the majority of your tribe you will do well enough."

The production of a five-dollar gold piece sharpened Ah Chung's wits considerably, and before long the two struck a bargain, though it is not necessary to record all the conversation by which it was reached. A load had apparently dropped from the mind of the Celestial as he skipped on toward Hard Hack Gulch, while Orange Able was very well satisfied as he sought the Garland, to inquire if Chriss Crookly had been seen there that evening.

"Well, I'll be hanged if I wouldn't like to know what wrinkle this is?" muttered Stephen Greene, as he emerged from what looked very much like a place of concealment, and gazed down the street after the retreating figure.

"I half-thought he was in earnest when he proposed to take off the top of the Chinaman's cabeza, and was going to chip in to

the rescue. Don't think I would now, very much. If the almond-eye isn't a rascal he played his part right up to nature. Wonder if I ought to warn the doctor? Guess I won't until I see what the partnership brings out. There must be something queer going on about the premises, or Orange Able would not be asking for a hand. I'll keep my eyes open, and maybe get hold of the right end of the string yet."

CHAPTER XXII.

DOCTOR FARLEY HINTS AT HIS PLANS.

SEVERAL days passed, and things remained unchanged at the residence of Doctor Farley. To his delight, and somewhat to his surprise, there was nothing that led him to suppose that the presence of his Chinese was known, or noticed, by the citizens.

Ah Chung continued to give satisfaction, though he saw but little of him. From what Nina said, the poor fellow was not very easy in his mind, and was liable to beat a temporary retreat at any time. Meanwhile the doctor had a chance to look around and find how impossible it would be to get any one to supply his place. It was a little strange that the doctor had not thought seriously of this part of the housekeeping scheme until he was fairly brought face to face with the difficulty. Cooks and house-servants were at a premium in Broad Ax—at least such as he wanted—and if Johnson had not had his wife to fall back on, the table of the Western Continent would have been a sorry spectacle.

Dr. Levant did not put in an appearance during these days. He had left word for the doctor that he was on the track of some interesting discoveries, and would be cut of the town for several days.

Of course this broke up the proposed dinner-party, or at least postponed it until his return, which, when afterward spoken of, caused Nina to smile in a way that her father could not understand, and which somewhat nettled him.

When he asked the cause of it, she gave some evasive answer, and came near to laughing outright. It was what she expected, and she would have been only too glad if she could have explained what to her was the joke of the season.

"Come, come," said the doctor. "Levant is not an old man, and if it was not for his spectacles he would not be a bad looking one. What do you girls want? For a young man he has certainly acquired considerable reputation, and he must have wealth to be able to pursue his investigations. I really think that Hilgarda could not do better; and if she would pay him a little more attention, it is possible that she would make a match of it."

"And what do you propose to do about your sorrowing daughter, in that case? Did it never strike you that in introducing such a desirable party into the bosom of your family, you were pretty apt to either break one heart, or catch neither? We never want anything so bad as that which we cannot have; and I have no doubt if aunt carried away the prize, I would go sorrowing to my grave."

"Bless my soul I did not think of that!" exclaimed the doctor. "I hope it is not so bad as that. Of course I might have remembered that little trait of feminine nature. What am I to do about it? There is so little opportunity out here, and I should be glad to see Hilgarda provided for. She has been with me so long, that I begin to feel as though she was a daughter rather than a sister. You don't mean to tell me that there has been any mischief done in so short a time? Perhaps I had better drop the acquaintance, after all. And yet I don't see how I can give him up. I have not seen so much of him, but he pleases me very much; and it seems to me that I need him just now to divert my mind; to keep it in certain channels from which it has a tendency to stray. I don't altogether understand myself lately at times."

"Very well; if you choose to run the risk. Of course the happiness of your daughter is a secondary matter. Or perhaps you had arranged for that in some other way. You parents have queer ideas sometimes. There is Mr. Wickfield, for instance. I would not be a particle surprised if you had been look-

ing on him as a nice man to have in the family."

This was a home shot. Farley had taken up the scheme on the spur of the moment, when he found that Nina had become interested in an individual that he thought was practically worthless, and had written to his friend that the matter they had once or twice spoken of in jest would be to him a matter of pleasant earnest if it could be accomplished. Since then he had by no means given it up; but at the same time, since the singular change of the last few days, it was not a thing so ardently desired that he would be much hurt at its falling through. As yet he had held no conversation with Ira on the subject since Nina had arrived; and was not even able to say that the young man was willing to go further now that they had met.

Not well knowing what to say, the doctor looked simple and kept silent.

"I do believe that you had something of the kind in your foolish head," continued Nina, as she managed to get her hands on her father's shoulders, and look him straight in the eyes.

He did not know how directly she had received the information, but rather fancied that it was a case of feminine shrewdness, against which he could offer no defense.

"Well, dear, it is quite natural that a father should consider such matters beforehand. There are worse men in the world than Ira Wickfield. He is steady as a church, doing well in business, and is my partner in a venture that I am afraid I coaxed him into against his sober judgment. He is a friend of mine, with all the word implies; but of course I have no idea of attempting to force your inclinations. You can be sure that what you see him of is Ira Wickfield himself. There is no veneering about him. He is pure gold, all the way through."

"So much the more reason why you should throw him in the way of Hilgarda, if he must go to some one in the family. She is the oldest and ought to go first. I can be provided for at any time, and half a dozen years from now might still be able to find a man of my own choice, who would be willing to take me off your hands without any parental urging. She ought to have a house to look after to keep her mind employed, and off of other things which are going to, some day, make her ridiculous. A great pity it is, too. I have learned to love her post haste, in spite of her little oddities."

The first part of Nina's speech was spoken a little bitterly. How it had originally come into her mind that her father had an idea of throwing Ira at her head, she scarcely knew. Probably by intuition, since no one had directly breathed a word to her on the subject. Then Blackburn had told her enough of his interview with Wickfield to convince her that her intuitions were right.

She had been waiting since then to have it out with her father, and this seemed as good a time as any. But she did not know how hard the latter part of this hit him, though he showed something of it in his face. Of course Farley's first idea was that Hilgarda had made a confidant of his daughter, either before or after her conversation with him, and that Nina was either seeking corroboration, or else expressing her disbelief of what she had heard, and attributing it in a measure to an imagination that had become diseased through idleness. He had never remarked any oddities in the conduct of Hilgarda, and was confident that in reality Nina had not, however strange a story she might have heard from her lips.

If he had been sure how much Hilgarda had told he would have known better how to answer. In the absence of that knowledge his only thought was to protect himself. He would have preferred that no one should share his secret, but it was better to have only one confidant than two; and if we was in any danger, as he sometimes thought and sometimes doubted, he wanted it kept as long as possible from his daughter's ears.

"I thought that we would not be very far apart when we came to compare notes," said the doctor, slowly. "The trouble is to see that what is good for some one else, is good for ourselves under the same circumstances. Out here, when a man once

fairly gets into the tide with the rest, and becomes interested in mining ventures and all that, life is held with a rather uncertain tenure. If I had been satisfied to rely entirely upon my profession it might have been safer, if the chances were not so great for brilliant success. Why, this Red Horse investment may make me a millionaire; and is just as likely to be the cause of my death. I speak frankly, because it is as well for you to know how things stand, and why I have thought some about arranging for the future of you two."

"And while you were worrying about such things did it never strike you that poor Morton was the very man that you wanted to bring into the family? At least, he would be if he was just such a man as you have tried to represent him to me. I can't say that you ever accused him of anything that I do not find you engaged in. And for the life of me I cannot see why he is not as good and as eligible as Ira Wickfield."

"Poor Morton, as you call him, is a gambler, and a professional bad man. When I want the services of such I prefer to pay for them in coin, and when I need them no more I can cut loose and let them go. I have such a man in the mine now. Ira Wickfield is a man who is fitted for any station in life, and if he rose to a post of honor there is not a word that can be said against his past life; nor would he appear out of place in any society. I grant that here Morton Blackburn compares favorably with the best, because they are all or nearly all of his own grade. But how would it be in the East, for instance; or in the circles in which a man like Levant is accustomed to move? He could not find an entrance there, even if he could keep his place when once admitted. I had hoped that nonsense was over; and was deeply grieved when I saw that he had not only followed you here, but had the hardihood to push himself into my own house. Fortunately he evaded me or there is no telling what I might have done in my blind wrath. Do not mention his name again in my hearing, since it can only awaken unpleasant feelings. As for Hilgarda and her follies—or oddities, as you call them—pay no attention to the folly, and accept the genuine love that I know she is ready to give you. I may tell you more some day; but not now."

The doctor hesitated a little, for he was debating within himself whether he had not better save enough to discount any revelations which Hilgarda might unguardedly make in spite of her pledge. So far, it seemed that she had not done any serious harm.

While he hesitated there was an interruption in the shape of Ah Chung, who came prancing into the room in considerable excitement.

"Kommittee man kohom foah Ah Chung. He no stay. Him skip klick. Back bymby soon. So longee! No catchee Ah Chung, no nabbe."

And away he dashed again, and was out of the house before the doctor could question him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DR. LEVANT MEETS A MAN WHO ASTONISHES HIM.

FORTUNATELY the dinner for the day had been over some time, and the affairs in the kitchen had been all straightened out, so that the sudden departure of Ah Chung was not as dire a misfortune as it would have been if it had occurred a few hours earlier.

Though the doctor waited in some anxiety for awhile, and even glanced from time to time down the road, there was no sign of the committee; and finally he began to believe that it was a false alarm. It seemed, however, only a little while after the disappearance of the Chinaman that Dr. Levant arrived.

Farley was not as glad to see him as he had been thinking that he would be. Since his talk with Nina, he felt a vague uneasiness. He would have liked a little time to himself, to reason it all out. Had he known it, he was coming back to himself. He did not feel so much like going down-town and painting things red, as he had been doing for some evenings; and for the last day or so he had been getting nearer again to Ira Wickfield. The allusion to Hilgarda and her fears had brought the supposed detective

back to his mind, and gone far to once more unsettle him.

However, the gentleman was there, and had evidently come to stay for a season. Farley made the best of it so successfully that before long the two were deep in a discussion of the points which seemed to be common ground.

By and by Wickfield appeared, and was, as before, relegated to the ladies. The evening passed quickly, and when Levant took his leave it was to receive a cordial invitation to come again and have the discussion out.

Dr. Levant seemed to be in high spirits as he strolled away. He laughed to himself at the remembrance of the invitation.

"After all, it looks as though the scheme might work," he was thinking.

"Farley is at times quite himself—and very unfortunate for me in more ways than one would it be if he was not. But it is going to be a deuce of a hank to unravel. Some parts of it, I reckon, had better be left untold until he is able to hear it. He is evidently coming my way fast enough, if he only don't make any mistake on the road."

So far had the young man got in his reflections over the evening and its results, when the current of his thoughts received a sudden interruption. Orange Able appeared in front of him.

"Does this fellow live around here?" was his first thought, as the man stepped forward with the confident swagger that marked his walk.

As Blackburn had not had any intercourse with the king-pin of bad men in his character of Levant, he could not imagine that Able had any especial business with him, unless he had seen through the disguise that he had thought was perfect. Still, he was prepared for anything, and it was just as well that he was, since Able had business with him, and very important business it was.

"Evening, pard. It's been some time, but I guess it won't be hard to remember, where we last met if we once get to talking. I often wondered how things were going with you since we parted, but I didn't guess that we would drift together in this out of the way place. You remember me, yet, old pard?"

"I can't say that—that—that I do," answered Mort, with the slight sputter which Levant always assumed when supposed to be a little excited.

"My acquaintance in Broad Ax is not—not very extended, and I do not remember to have met you anywhere else. But I have been a traveler in my day, and my profession has brought me in contact with many people, who remember me better than I do them. If—if you mentioned your name, perhaps I could recall you better. It is really too dark to see your face; and your voice tells me nothing."

"Oh, I don't suppose that you are very anxious to recognize me, and you would be better satisfied if I was dead, or a thousand miles away. By the time we are done talking I am pretty certain that you will be, even if you are not now."

"Don't you think—think, that perhaps you have been mistaken? So far as I can remember, we are total strangers."

"Not a bit of it. I don't make mistakes in matters of business. You are Doctor Simon Levant, late of the navy. I thought that I remembered your face, and looked your name up at the hotel. Then a friend of mine, who is in the house you have just left, has been giving me a few points; and what he said was enough to make me sure that I was on the right track. Simon, I have been doing you the biggest kind of a favor for a good many years, without seeing any reason for it; but now the time has come for payment, and I want you. You may as well come off of the perch without any preliminary crowing, for if you try to squirm I have you very foul."

"But—but bless my soul, you have not yet told me who you are. And—and I am not accustomed to being spoken to after this manner. I will have to refuse to have any further communication with you here, unless you adopt a different line, and explain who you are."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Able, at the indignant tones of Levant. "You would do a good

deal more than risk your reputation, standing in a desolate street, talking to Orange Able, to save your neck. And that is what it means. It is Orange Able now; it used to be Bronson Welch in the days when you and I were pards together. If that don't tell you enough, perhaps I had better go over a little history, that will bring you still better to your memory."

Levant gave a start and a little exclamation, such as a man would be likely to give that had received an unpleasant communication. It was a safe thing to do under the circumstances, and would throw Orange off the track. Unless there were very excellent reasons, Mort did not intend to give up his disguise. Then he quietly answered:

"Perhaps you had."

"No use, doctor. You have given yourself away, and you may as well come off the perch. Of course, if you want to hear anything that I should think was deucedly unpleasant hearing, I can give you the full history of the affair on the Rajah, where you got the start in life that brings you here a rich man, while I am still the poor devil, with big aspirations, that I always was. But this is not the place to tell such yarns, and if you want to hear it in full, we had better adjourn to a place that is not quite so public. It may take time to get through with the yarn, and when it is done I'll venture more money than you got from old Hugh Hatton, that you will have a better rememberer than the forgetter that you are trying to wring in on me just now."

There was an air of sardonic triumph about Orange as he spoke, that warned Blackburn there was a secret of some kind behind all this; and a secret that would have put the real Doctor Levant in the power of this bold rascal. It was fortunate that Blackburn felt able at any time to drop the character; and it seemed to him that the original Doctor Levant was fortunate in being where this rascal could not very handily get at him, without a greater effort than he would care to make. The true Simon Levant was dead.

"All right," was Blackburn's answer.

"You may be Welch, or you may not. If you are, you can easily prove it by explaining the facts you are alluding to. If I recognize them, I can hardly fail to remember you. I do not care to go to my room at present, but will be happy to adjourn to any place in town where my presence will not excite comment; or take a stroll into the country, where we may be reasonably free from observation. I suppose that your object is not altogether a pacific one, or you would not approach me in such a hectoring manner."

"No country for me, if you please. I can't say that I trust you altogether, and I don't want to get you into a box where I will have to kill you. I have too much need of your services just now, to desire you to hop the twig. If it came to a question of your life or mine, of course that would be the result. You can go around to my shanty with me, and I can vouch for it that there will be no intrusion there."

"All right, lead away. I am at your service," responded Blackburn, with seeming recklessness.

There was every chance that for the present neither his life nor purse was in jeopardy; and it seemed there was a chance for information by the cord.

CHAPTER XXIV.

PLAIN TALK FROM ORANGE ABLE.

"PLAIN talk, pard, is good for the soul," said Able, as the two seated themselves in the cabin which he made his headquarters.

"What I want you to understand is that I have you in a vise, and if I can't use you I will squeeze before I let go. I am the sure enough Welch, that helped to nurse young Hatton, on the Rajah, when you and his uncle put the boy out of the way. Hatton is dead, sure enough, and a very neat thing I made out of him after you had disappeared. I have the statement that the boy and I drew up when he was dying, and which I swore to you I had destroyed. I have also a confession of Hatton himself, in which he shows how he was able to take advantage of your necessities, and bend you into the case. It all makes elegant reading, and with certain additions that I could make would be enough to hang you high as Haman

if placed in the hands of the boy's mother's family. Now, then, have I the right to ask you a favor, or have I not?"

Blackburn played the collapse of the defeated, detected villain to the life. He sunk back with a groan—and was meantime thinking how he could use all this to the best advantage, as regarded Mr. Able himself. For a moment it was not necessary to answer anything at all.

"Yes, doctor, you can grunt and squirm, but I have the cold facts all down in the shape to use to the best advantage. I put them together to use on old Hatton; and as there was no hitch in the programme then, I guess they are good enough now, and for you. I don't think you are any sharper than the old man was, and they were good enough for him."

"How—how much do you think that silence on such a matter is worth?" began Blackburn, with a semblance of caution.

"If you think that I am a rich man you are very much mistaken. If I was I would not be hiding myself in this hole."

"Or if you were not afraid that something of this would leak out, as such things always do, sooner or later. I know that you didn't make what you got from Hatton go very far—it all went at the first faro bank after you got on shore—but I thought you might have been following the thing up as a profession, after you once got your hand in. It might be made to pay if you struck the right sort of clients, and bled them scientifically afterwards."

"Never—never. That one fatal step was the sole lapse from the true path; and for that I have paid a million times in what I have suffered!" gasped Morton.

"It was the curse of my life that could never be lifted. Without it I could have won fame and honor and wealth; but the haunting memory has almost driven me mad. And now, when I had almost begun to think that my sin was buried it has found me out."

"Oh, no. It is Orange Able that has found you out. I don't reckon that the other ever lost you. But there is no use to groan over it. All you have to do is to come down; and I don't want you to come very hard, either. You see, I have a little scheme in view, that you can help me in very materially, without any risk to yourself if you keep your mouth shut about having any knowledge of me. All you will have to do is to go straight ahead in a certain line that is honest enough of itself, and I will provide for the rest. If you betray me before the time comes when it can make no difference, I will either hand you over to the law, or lift the top of your brain-box with my revolver, whichever comes most handy. What do you say? Is it life or is it death? Life is my way; and any other way is death to you."

"Life it is," said the doctor, looking up desperately.

"So it be nothing that involves the taking of a human life I am with you."

"Good enough, old pard. And I am going to give it to you straight as a string, for I don't have a doubt but that you know you're in a corner, and dare not play me foul. You and I are about of a bigness, pard; and with the same rigging on look a good bit alike. That is the whole scheme. After it is over if you think there is a snarl you can get out of it any way you like. It won't make any difference to me."

"What is it that you—you are driving at?" inquired Blackburn, with real curiosity. He had a glimmering idea of what Able was going to propose, and yet the truth was so far in advance, that when Orange spoke it came with a shock.

"As I told you, I am going to give it to you straight, to show you how well I know that you are in my power; and must dance as I choose to fiddle. I came down in the stage a few days ago with Doc Farley and his daughter. I don't mind saying that I made a fool of myself on the road; but that was because I was in a thundering bad humor when I started, and because I had not fairly seen the dainty damsel."

"The long and short of it is that I lost my heart, or what passes and does duty for such. You need not grin about it, my friend; for much as I need your services I would blow you cold without hesitation. The doctor is

stuck up enough, anyhow; and since the performance in the stage, and what came afterwards, there's not much use in coming at him on a square basis. I did begin to broach the subject to him, but, curse him! before I had the chance to explain he had me kicked into the middle of the street. I swear, if he had not been her father, I would have murdered him then and there. When I think of it now it makes me want to go back and do it anyhow. A fellow has to take a heap from his father-in-law—before-hand."

Orange Able gnashed his teeth in his rage, and it was as much as Blackburn could do, to keep from falling on him bodily, and crushing the life out of him. Anger and surprise held him dumb for a season, while Able went on:

"But that is neither here nor there. The scheme I am on now, is something better. It has the benefit of a big surprise in it, and it gets there just the same."

"The way of it is this: I notice that you and the old man are on pretty good terms. I have it from good authority that he has no objection to taking you into the family. The young lady is sweet on you, too. You are not the sort of man to care for anybody but yourself. Go ahead with your courting. Get the lady's consent; get the old gentleman to fix the day, if the girl won't. Keep things moving till the appointed time. Then you can leave that suit of clothes behind, and another one, with any other little articles that will go for identity in an incidental way, and disappear. If you can't find a reasonable excuse for going, I'll make you one—could be carried off by the Crosseys, for instance—and I will step in to fill your shoes to the best of my poor ability. I think I can carry the character of Simon Levant long enough to get through the ceremony and start on the wedding trip. After that you can return to life as soon as you want to, and howl with the worst of them. I will insure you that you never hear anything more of the Hatton matter, and you will be the worst pitied man in all Broad Ax if you choose to tell your story remarkably straight."

"Bless—bless my soul! This is a singular proposition, and one that you could hardly have sufficient knowledge of the family in question to make in serious earnest. You must be simply—simply, ah, trying to pump me," stammered Blackburn, more taken aback than he had believed possible by anything that Orange could proffer.

"I will admit that I have some acquaintance in the family, resultant upon a slight surgical operation that I performed the evening of the doctor's arrival. But that he looks at me with an eye at all favorable to taking me into his family, or that the young lady is more than ordinarily grateful for the little service that I rendered, is more than you or I can know, or do know. I should like to hear how you obtained your information."

"Partly from a— Well, some one who is on the ground, but principally through looking into the window. In love and war one must not be above taking such advantages. But that has nothing to do with the facts, which are as I state them. There need be no time for you to make up your mind about it. Fair and square, are you going to help me, or are you not? You want to talk right out, for I am in no mood to dilly-dally. Yes or no, which is it?"

To emphasize his question, Orange tapped sharply on the table at which they were sitting with the barrel of the pistol that suddenly appeared in his right hand. Several times during the conversation had Mort Blackburn quietly held the drop on the unscrupulous villain, but just now he saw that he was at his mercy, and must remain so for anything that he could do to change the situation. He was cool enough, however, and was able to consider how he should answer this audacious proposition. Able did not intend to wait long, but he certainly could make a little allowance for the surprise that must be felt.

Nor did it take long for Blackburn to make up his mind. Unless he wanted to kill Able before the conference broke up, there was little to be gained by showing any particular abhorrence of the plan; and if

Able had an idea that it was practicable, it was not necessary to try to convince him of the contrary. After just the proper time to decide, Blackburn answered:

"If I had money I would offer you your own price sooner than to enter into a plot like this; but, as you say, you have me in a vise, and I see no way to escape, since I never dare reveal that such a proposal has been made to me, on account of my own safety. Of course there is nothing for me to do but to say, yes."

"Spoken like a man and a gentleman!" exclaimed Orange Able, heartily.

"You see, when I want a thing I want it bad; and what I want bad I generally have, one way or another. If the doctor had showed himself a reasonable man, when I called on him to open the way, there would have been no need of all this roundabout work. As it is, we will carry it through if it takes a wheel off. Now, let me give you a few ideas how the thing had best be run. Of course I don't expect to deceive the charming Nina very long, but after we are once away on the grand tour it matters little how soon she finds out the truth. It will be too late to alter it then."

Again Orange Able's life was in danger, but by an effort Blackburn refrained from pulling trigger, and with outward calm listened to the further details of this remarkable scheme. When he left, an hour had been spent in the conversation, and he had become absolutely certain that Able was in earnest. And neither he nor Orange saw the dark figure that glided away, muttering: "It seems to me that I am getting hot. But blame me if I wouldn't like to know which is the biggest rascal of those two."

CHAPTER XXV.

AH CHUNG NUMBER TWO CAUSES A FLUTTER.

THE dark figure that flitted away from the vicinity of Orange Able's cabin belonged to Stephen Greene.

He did not go very far before he halted, hid himself, and waited. When the spurious Dr. Levant came along he gently dropped on his trail, and followed him to his room at the Western Continent. He had some idea of interviewing the doctor, but waited until he saw him close the door behind him, and then cautiously approached and listened.

He heard the man throw himself down into his chair. For a moment there was silence; and then, to his great surprise the sole occupant of the room burst into a ringing laugh, followed by the exclamation in the vernacular:

"Well dog-gone my tail-feathers, if this don't beat chicken-fighting."

After that all was silence again, though Greene listened for some time. The supposition was, that the young man was quietly thinking over the event of the evening.

The laugh disconcerted the man outside. It was not what he had expected. There was something too hearty about it not to be genuine; and it was so widely at variance with the tone of the doctor, under what he had thought was the rack itself, that Greene did not seek the interview as he had intended, but went softly away.

The fact was, Blackburn, having given his wrath time to cool, saw the amusing side of the project; and it was the thought of Orange Able's blank astonishment should he learn the truth, which caused the laugh heard by Stephen Greene. He did not again speak aloud, but he kept on with his thinking all the same.

"Who could have imagined that Levant was such a scoundrel. Poor fellow; perhaps he repented bitterly enough when it was all over, and the work could not be undone. Of course there must be more than less truth in the story, or Able would never have been willing to hazard such a cast on it. What sublime nerve the scoundrel has. The idea of a man like Orange Able aspiring to Nina. If I had not been pretty well seasoned to everything I would have killed him for his impudence. Would she laugh or be angry, I wonder, if I told her of the conquest she had made? I know her opinion of the man, and I am afraid it might not be altogether safe to jest with her on so serious a subject. But, confound it, how am I to get out of the thing without giving myself away? I guess

it is time for Levant to be relegated to the tomb, and for Mort Blackburn to try some other plan, that is not so wildly impracticable, for ingratiating himself with the father of my divinity. Orange may be honest in his belief that he is the sole holder of the secret, and yet some one else may know of it. It would be too utterly too-too to be hung for the unworthy Levant—and if I was once fairly caught in this disguise there might be some trouble in proving my identity.

"It would be a rich joke to give Nina the hint, and then go on with the bargain. Post him as to the supposititious wedding-day, and let him arrive all dressed up for the occasion that Farley knew nothing about. It would be about as good a way as any to make the late surgeon in the navy retire. Might be on hand to arrest him as the man that killed young Hatton. That would be carrying the joke pretty far; but confound me if I don't believe that I will try it on! Nina half-expects me to make an example of some of the bad men about town, and I may as well begin with Able. I know no one who deserves it more. I'll never be satisfied until I get even with him for what he has said to-night.

"If I am to go ahead with any such scheme, I will have to be a more frequent visitor at the doctor's, and to do that I will have to bring the real Ah Chung into the collar. Ahem! There would be a chance to work in a little more mystification. The poor little woman don't know to this minute what to make of the gentleman in the kitchen. It has been as good as a circus; and the best of it all is that the aunt suspects something—she does not know exactly what. I will make a clean breast to Nina, to-morrow, and see what she says. Confound it! I suppose I will have to persuade her to run off with me yet. That seems to be the only way out of the scrape. Pending the open confession, I think Dr. Levant had better take the opportunity to turn in and get a fair night's sleep. There is no telling what sort of a racket I will be engaged in by this time to-morrow night."

Mort Blackburn's reflections were closed for the night; and when Orange Able was pacing up and down his cabin, hot with his plan to satisfy both his love and his vengeance, Blackburn was sound asleep, with a pleasant smile on his face.

The next morning there was some consternation at the Farley residence, when the breakfast hour passed, and Ah Chung failed to put in an appearance. This was somewhat heightened when, about ten o'clock, Dr. Levant was seen approaching. Farley was away, of course, but the ladies were not altogether ready to receive morning callers, since they had taken their work in their own hands, and were flying around indifferent to appearances. Breakfast had been wrestled with in a manner that had been indifferently successful, and they were deep in the mysteries of sweeping.

Hilgarda was flurried enough, but it was only on account of the looks of things; while Nina looked further into the future, wondering whether it would be possible to find a chance for a little confidential discourse, and if her father would be willing to set before a gentleman of such fastidious taste as Dr. Levant might be supposed to be, the dinner that she and Hilgarda would have to prepare. Her own experience was limited, and that of her aunt was nothing.

Nevertheless, Nina had to keep up appearances before her aunt, and not run down her own wisdom, lest she lose the place of superiority, which she had been tacitly assuming on account of her superior knowledge. Hilgarda's face was very sober as they received Levant, but Nina was smiling enough to make up for it.

"An unexpected pleasure, doctor. You find us at our avocations; but we can lay them aside for a time, and perhaps Providence will send us some relief, before we are compelled to take them up again. For some cause best known to himself our housemaid deserted us yesterday, and has not sent us word whither he had taken himself. As he did not tarry long enough to draw the wages that are due him I have some hopes that he will be on the carpet again. He is a miserable hand at housework—in fact, flatly refuses to do anything at all save cook—but a poor servant is better than none at

all. Until we get a better one, he is invaluable."

With the words still lingering on her lips, the door to the kitchen opened noiselessly, and into the room skipped Ah Chung.

"Misse no hap worry. Kommittlee man no hap kohom, Ah Chung be alle lounde, ebley timee."

At the sound of the voice, which was the first intimation that he was in the room, Hilgarda started, and looked earnestly at the returned servitor, while Nina's face put on a look of blank amazement. If the doctor had been anything but a scientist he could not have helped seeing that something singular accompanied the return of Ah Chung. Faithful to his character, he did not even look in the direction of the Chinaman, and appeared to pay no regard to the interruption, after he had absently taken in its nature.

"In the name of wonder, who are you?" asked Nina, at length, a little recovered.

"And how did you get here? You move like a ghost, and if I believed in such things I would be willing to qualify that you are the wraith of the Chinaman we have been lamenting since yesterday."

"Me no ghostee, me Ah Chung. Me skip out, hear lo kommittlee man kohom. Go Hald Hack Gulch, lay low. T'at be allo rightee t'is timee. Kommittlee man no hap pidgin to Ah Chung; he stay; he no lun away, he be allo lounde, allo timee. Savvy t'at? No wolly. Him takee light hold. Ebley t'ing on wheels."

And having thus done his best to reassure them, Ah Chung skipped out once more, and if he had been followed ever so immediately, he would have been found at work in the kitchen as though he had always belonged there.

"Oh, Nina, do you think it is another? Something tells me it is not the same person. What shall we do?"

Hilgarda clasped her hands, and spoke in a strained whisper that was certainly loud enough to be heard all over the room.

The aunt might have her follies; but she had also a very quick eye, or she would not have detected the trifling difference in the make up. She had not the light to go by that Nina had, and in the casual glance that she seemed to take there was little time to examine closely into the little points of difference that existed.

"Hush, dear, I suppose the Celestial has been on an opium debauch all night, and dwelling with the angels. There is something like reflected glory in his face. At least, he is not so absolutely hideous as he at first appeared. There is no cause to worry. He is harmless enough. I said that the first time that I saw him."

"What seems to be the matter with him?" asked the doctor coming out of his reverie. The innuendos of Nina had reached his ears as plainly as the whispers of the aunt; and were just as clearly understood.

"Nothing, nothing," hurriedly interposed Hilgarda.

"I suppose that I am nervous, and excited since the return of my brother; and have queer fancies at odd moments, when anything comes suddenly on me. For an instant I thought that this Chinaman had a different appearance from the other. Of course, I must have been mistaken."

The doctor smiled languidly, and settled his spectacles after his habitude.

"To my notion they are all so much alike that to tell one from another is proof of anything but a mind given to queer fancies. Rather, it argues the height of mental acumen. Differences in specimens of the race—so far as I have observed—are slight; perhaps it would be well to investigate the matter if you have observed any variances. Before doing so, however, I would advise that you take a second look, observing him at his work. Then, if it seems worth while, you might have him in here for examination. I have some acquaintance with the language and the race, and we will find out what it all means."

The doctor was not taking the best means to allay the fears of the lady, but he was doing the best that he could to get her out of the room.

The scheme proved more successful than he had hoped. Now that she had spoken of them her fears seemed to have been but fancies, and she was anxious to prove them so

to herself. When she had left the room Dr. Levant's mood took a sudden turn. He put his spectacles in his pocket, and advanced with an ardor that would perhaps have been more satisfactory to Orange Able than to Dr. Farley, had they seen it.

"If you please, not so fervent," laughed Nina, retreating hastily, however.

"I have an uncomfortable idea that the house is being watched, and as this affair with the distinguished scientist is only intended to be a temporary matter, some one might think that I was very easily consoled, if not worse, when he goes off the stage. There, there; that will do. Imagine Hilgarda returning suddenly. She would be more than ever satisfied that there is a mystery somewhere."

As she spoke she slipped lightly from his arm, that had somehow managed to slip around her, in spite of her seemingly earnest effort to escape.

"You don't seem to have much pity for me, and that is a fact," said Morton, rather ruefully regarding the handsome, laughing face in front of him.

A fellow that has been undergoing all the tantalization that I have, for the last week or more, ought to have some recompense or reward."

"And after the manner you have been keeping me at arm's end, in the kitchen, ought not to expect me to be any more fervent in the parlor. What is the meaning of this sudden change, by the way? Who is the Chinese gentleman that you have now introduced? It was bad enough in the first place, and I have been fighting aunt's suspicions; but just when I have them fairly laid, you must bring them all to life again. Nothing will satisfy her now that there is not a deep plot of some kind against my father's peace of mind or safety. All I have been able to do, I have not been able to assure myself that she will not go to him with her idea, and open his eyes to what a plotting there has been, and what a share his daughter has had in it."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A YOUNG LADY IN TROUBLE.

"EITHER your aunt has very good eyes, or something had already aroused her suspicions," said Blackburn, thoughtfully.

"If there was any difference in the two Ah Chungs, it was not enough to swear to; and I do not see why she perceived it."

"She certainly was all ready to suspect something, and the moment she laid eyes on you, she said that you were no Chinaman, but an American in disguise. Had it not been for that, I might have been deceived myself; but of course, after that, I could see enough to recognize; and it was the surprise of my life when the duplicate presented himself. Now, sir, I begin to have curiosity enough to demand what is the meaning of this double masquerade. Perhaps, after all, the gentleman in the kitchen is the original Doctor Levant. I am willing to believe almost anything so that it is the truth."

"How can you doubt the truth?" answered Blackburn, reproachfully.

"I wanted to be near you; and I saw the trouble that you were in. Why should we not both be happy?"

"If you got any happiness out of the kitchen, you are really welcome to it. You might as well have been sweltering in the Western Continent."

"I admit there were certain contingencies on which I had not counted. Chiefly, Hilgarda, who had a most elegant knack of getting in the way just when I felt most like being confidential. But the Continent could offer no such wages as awaited me here. Or have you forgotten? Did not your venerated father say that the matter of stipend was left entirely with you? and that he would ratify any bargain that you might make? Why, there is nothing to interfere with your naming the happy day at once. And perhaps you had better do it. Unfortunately it becomes necessary for Doctor Levant to emigrate, or take some other measures to secure his safety. I have just learned that he was a bigger rascal than I had supposed possible, or than I care to be. Which shows how mistaken your father has been in his men. Not even for the sake of less trouble in becoming his son-in-law would I risk my neck to the rope any

longer, and I warn you that it is a P. P. C. call. After to-night Doctor Simon Levant will never be visible any more."

"That is, unless he puts in an appearance in *bona-fide* shape," suggested Nina, not entirely understanding her lover.

"It is to be hoped he never will, or you will see a wraith for certain. The original, from which I know that I have drawn a pretty fair copy, is dead. I always thought he was a queer sort of fish, and since last night I know the reason for his being so. I have drawn the personation so truly to life that I have been threatened with the law by one who knew him well, and was a partner in the affair that might have cost him his life according to law."

"Oh, my! Poor papa! What a shock to him it would be to learn it. His admiration for the author of the Bacterian Theory of Disease is so great. It was only yesterday that he was speaking of him in such admiring terms. Indeed, I think it would be well if the knowledge of it could be kept from him altogether. How did you find it out; and who is there here that could have known the real Levant?"

"That last is the question that I might have asked myself a long time before I would have guessed the answer. Think over your list of admirers, and see who would be most likely to fill the bill."

"My admirers? Surely you do not mean Ira Wickfield? Outside of yourself that completes the list—and I am not so sure of Ira."

"Not Ira, by any means. It was no less a person than Orange Able, the king-pin of the bad men of Broad Ax, who fell in love with you while on the way here, and has been trying ever since to devise ways and means to approach you. I came especially to tell you of his latest idea. As he had chosen to make me his partner in it, whether I am willing or not, you can see the reason that I have for dropping the disguise; which you know I wanted to do as soon as I found what a serious matter it might become with your father."

"Oh, dear! Why cannot you show him yourself as you really are? If he can fancy you as Doctor Levant I am sure there is nothing in the way of his liking you as Morton Blackburn."

"I tried to give the thing a trial, and he wanted to shoot me on sight. Perhaps he will take more kindly to Able. He has shown a proclivity for such society of late."

"But you are not in earnest in what you say about that dreadful man?" asked Nina, more than a little agitated at what she had heard, and scarcely knowing which point to discuss first.

"Dreadfully in earnest, as I am afraid that you will find him to be. When I tell you his plan I think you must agree with me."

"Tell it quick, then. It is a wonder that Hilgarda has not come on the stage before this. That would delay the story, and I am too anxious to wait."

"Miss Hilgarda probably knows what she is about. I fancy that if it was Ira Wickfield she would have been here long ago; much as she tries to give a fair field and a little favor. It strikes me that she is not as wildly enthusiastic about your father's scheme as she would be if it did not conflict a bit with one of her own. Here is how the land lays."

It had taken Blackburn some time to get at the story, for he had not even yet entirely decided on the course he would best like to pursue. Now he gave up the desultory style, and brought himself down strictly to business.

Nina interrupted him with various exclamations of surprise and indignation; and when at the end he proposed the plan he had thought of the previous evening, and which had furnished him so much amusement, she did not know whether she was too angry to laugh, or too much amused to cry.

"And unless it is to further some such thing Doctor Levant will settle his board bill, and vanish. I have kept up the mystification at the Continent about as long as it can successfully be done, and there may be an explosion there, yet; to say nothing of Orange Able lurking in the bushes, ready with his guns the moment that I fail to walk

the chalk-line that he has drawn for me. Of course I could dispose of him; but it might produce some awkward revelations, unless we discounted them beforehand. You spoke of the house being watched. Ah Chung had already promised Able to keep him posted on what was going on here—without any idea, of course, as to what the scoundrel was after—and now, from what he said, I am pretty sure that he was keeping an eye on it himself. I am inclined to think the redoubtable Able is even a worse man than Broad Ax has given him credit with being, and one merit of the plan is that until he has given himself openly away, it may keep him from trying something even more desperate; and that would not be so easily defeated. What do you say? Shall Doctor Levant retire, or shall he keep Orange in play, at least until something has been decided on? Perhaps you will yet see that the best way out of the complication is to leave Broad Ax as two, and come back as one. I don't see any other way to get rid of his attentions.

Although Nina did not fully understand the actual danger of having attracted the attention of a man, who was willing to take all sorts of risks, and try all sorts of plans to further his aims; the idea of his having seriously tried to enter into such a scheme made her more than uncomfortable, and she was almost willing to adopt anything that would be likely to checkmate him.

Still, she was not decided on what was the best plan to pursue; and wanted time to think it over. She even said that she must ask her father's counsel; but against that Blackburn had the strongest kind of an argument.

"I wouldn't do that, my dear. So far it is only you and I; but if your father is drawn into it there is no telling what will happen. We can take things coolly, and in time make Able suffer for his presumption; but if the doctor gets hold of this thing he will want to have it out at once. Then there will be cutting and shooting, and that kind of foolishness, and no one can tell how it will all end. I must say that there were unknown capacities about your paternal ancestor that made me open my eyes; but I am afraid that at his best he is not the sort to venture into a shooting frolic with such a past master as our friend, Able. He would be unwilling to take what he would consider an unfair advantage but would want to ring the bell and blow the whistle, let Able know that he was coming—and there he would be. Without committing ourselves we must let Orange have a chance for something overt, that will put public opinion right, and then I will take care of him."

"Oh, no doubt you are right," pouted Nina, who could not long be terrorized without something tangible in front of her; "but it seems to me that you are inclined to monopolize the conduct of affairs, and say what I must and must not do, just as though I belonged to you. It seems to me that there are others to be consulted; and I am sure that I never told you that you could do more than hope. What do you suppose Mr. Wickfield would think if he overheard this conversation?"

"I don't suppose that Mr. Wickfield would do anything; and if he tried to he would undoubtedly be shot. He is not the sort to have much to do with a man of Mr. Able's abilities."

"Oh, dear, what shall I do?" sighed Nina, her mood once more changing, as she thought of Ira in serious conversation with the man of the stage. "Thank Providence, there comes Hilgarda. I will not have to do anything for the present. Don't let Doctor Levant disappear, and I will think it over. If I had only refused to countenance your folly in the first place I would not be in such a terrible dilemma now."

And just in time to escape observation, she drew herself away; while the doctor barely had time to arrange his spectacles when Hilgarda came flying into the room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IRA HEARS THE NEWS—AND SO DO THE OTHERS.

HILGARDA had not spent all her time in observing the Chinaman. She would not have admitted it, perhaps, but she had no objection to leaving Nina alone with Dr. Levant a little longer than she would have

cared to do with Ira Wickfield. As she had no present fears of the Chinaman she went directly to the kitchen. She had never tried to converse with the Ah Chung who had been presiding in the kitchen for some days. His pidgin English had been from the first more than she could conquer. Of course this Ah Chung—if he was a different one—would be open to the same objection. As far as the sounds of the voice went she had already decided there was a difference, slight but discernible; and as the first comer was pretty well photographed in her mind she depended on any bodily difference that she could distinguish, and upon the way in which he took up the work in a strange place, to tell her whether this was really another man.

Ah Chung was equal to the occasion. He seemed to know by instinct where the pots and kettles, where the starch and sugar was, and was already slinging around the materials for dinner in a lively manner.

And yet, a few moments' observation satisfied her more than ever that this was not the Ah Chung who originally presented himself. If not, then what was he there for? and why the substitution, or was he off on some other clew, to return again? She believed that it was time to take her brother into confidence about what was going on in his house, in spite of the fun that Nina was inclined to make over her supposed discoveries. Now was a good a time to do it as any, while her niece was busy with her company. She got her hat and parasol, and quietly started off in search of Dr. Farley.

The doctor was not in his office, and not knowing where else to look for him Hilgarda turned her steps toward Wickfield's store, where, if she did not find him she would be likely to gain some intelligence of his possible whereabouts. Of course, the thought of meeting Ira had nothing to do in making up her mind to the call.

She found the store. Indeed, it seemed to her that she knew only too well where it was. Since she had become aware of her brother's idea of making Wickfield one of the family, she had not cared to tread the road quite so often as she had unconsciously done in days before; but the way was very familiar.

Ira was in his office, and she could see his head through the glass window that separated it from the store. Without pausing, she went on through.

He was busy at his books, but looked up with a cheerful smile as she entered.

"Ah, the old friend has returned once more," he said, as he slid down off of his stool, and offered his hand.

"It has been so long since you were here that I am almost afraid the safe and ledgers will take you for a stranger. Of course since your niece—since Miss Farley—is with you, and your brother has returned, you have your engagements at home; but really, you must not confine yourself too closely to the new house, or it will be the death of you. Better make haste slowly getting things in shape, and if that Chinaman has not turned up yet, I would advise that you come back to the Western Continent. For a time, at least, I think the young lady might endure the accommodations there, especially with the little gem of a cottage to fall back on, when what I will admit are the fluffy rooms of the Continent become unendurable."

It seemed as if Mr. Wickfield was just the least bit excited. He talked for the sake of talk, without much thought of what he was saying. If Hilgarda had been willing to listen, he might have been talking yet.

But something in his voice told her a good deal more than he was saying—unless she was very wildly mistaken—and for the very first time in her intercourse with Ira Wickfield she was conscious of blushing, as she dropped the hand that he had so cordially presented.

"As you have made my excuses better than I could have done myself, I shall not plead the new duties I have been engaged in. I have been a little more closely confined than before, but that will only be temporary. The house is in shape, and our Chinaman has returned to his post. At least, there is one of the saffron-colored dignitaries flying around in the kitchen, though I have my doubts whether it is the same one that we originally engaged. They look so much alike that one cannot tell with any certainty.

There is something about this one that is, somehow, unfamiliar. It is very strange, and I wish to consult my brother about it. Can you tell me where I may find him?"

There was a little air of mystery about the communication that seemed almost as pleasant to use as if she was sharing a secret. Ira was attracted. At the same time he had an explanation.

"It does seem strange, since you would certainly be apt to know whether this was the same man that was with you only a day or so ago. Perhaps, however, I can give you an idea. It was something of a surprise when the doctor explained to me that he had secured the services of a Mongolian. You know that in the early history of Broad Ax the citizens passed an ordinance excluding them from the camp. It was a *viva voce* affair, that I do not think you could find written on any statute book; but as it was very savagely enforced on several occasions, the race has been inclined to give the town a wide berth. I did not suppose, until I saw the fellow at your house, that one of them could be induced to attempt to take service here for love or money. It may be that several of them, tempted by large wages, are willing to take the risk in turns. To their untutored minds it seems a fair gambling game. If there is no unpleasantness they will divide the wages. If one is hung by the mob, the other will fall heir to the entire stipend. They will come turn about, until the danger is proved to be nothing, or until one of them is hung. As for the doctor, it is most likely that you will find him, or should find him, were you willing to seek him there, at the Red Horse. To my surprise, since his return he has taken quite an interest in the mine. I am afraid that there is going to be trouble there; but he seems willing to face it, and is likely to give Mr. Riley an unpleasant surprise if he attempts to jump the claim. I should have gone out with him to-day, but he preferred me to wait until later on, when my services might be of some account—as he said. He will doubtless come here first on his return, and I will acquaint him with your desire to see him. Do not be in a hurry. It is possible that he may come in at any time."

The idea suggested by Ira had more comfort in it than he suspected. In that view was a fair explanation of the change, and it was thus possible that she had been mistaken in her first suspicions. She thanked him for his offer, and was about to take her leave when there was an interruption that brought an explanation of surprise from Wickfield, and a cry of alarm from her.

Into the office rushed a rough-looking man, in the garb of a miner. He was panting from a hard run, and even yet had not got over the excitement that had started him on his wild chase.

On his arm was a rude bandage just above a smutch of blood, and his face had whitened visibly, as if from loss of blood.

"I say, Wickfield," he began, without delay.

"There's blazes to pay over at ther Red Horse. Riley is going for ther claim ther best he knows how, and he means business. If you don't believe it, look at that."

He held up his arm, from which a drop of blood fell to the floor.

"What is the meaning of that?" asked Ira. He was in no particular danger himself, and after the first shock was over, could afford to be cool.

"It means ther two tunnels have run together, and now there's only room fur one gang ter work 'em. I'm bettin' that gang is a-goin' ter be Riley's. He come with ther drop; an' he's the kind that don't let up when they get the advantage. They jest told us ter travel, an' when we didn't start, began ter plug without further warnin'. I got this pill in my arm, and saw Doc Farley go under. Then I thought I had business up here. Ther firm's busted, sure; an' I wouldn't give a chew ov terbacker fur your share in what's left. I reckoned you would like to hear ther news, so I stopped in ter tell yer. Now I'm off ter hunt fur Stout. Ef you want ter know any more about it, you kin go an' see how it is yerself."

The man spoke in no very respectful way. The day of Ira as a mine-owner was in his view practically over, and he had no further

use for him. When he had relieved himself of what he looked on as an unpleasant duty he turned, and left as abruptly as he came.

Hilgarda listened to the last word, and then, without waiting for Wickfield to comfort or explain, turned also, and fled. This was the intelligence that burst from her lips as she rushed into the room where Nina and her lover were, and the consternation it caused can well be imagined.

That is, Nina felt the consternation; while Morton Blackburn suddenly became as cool as an iceberg.

"Do not be unnecessarily alarmed, Nina dear," he whispered, aching to give her a reassuring caress, but not sure that Miss Hilgarda would be too excited to notice it.

"The man that brought that information is either a cur, or had sold out to the enemy. I would like to see that wound of his probed before I would believe it more than skin deep. When your father settles to his avocation he knows what he is about as well as Mr. Riley, or any other man. And he has a party with him that is just as wide-awake, and knows all the ins and outs of such things by name. They could work no such surprise on Stephen Greene. Pick up your courage and I will go and see what the truth of the thing is. If there is anything in it your father will not object to see me coming with another revolver."

"Go then," responded Nina very bravely, and as he did not seem inclined to tarry a moment longer that was sufficient to reassure him she accompanied him to the door, leaving Hilgarda on the lounge in something like hysterics.

"And oh, Morton!" she exclaimed, while her cheek was suspiciously near to him, "if we once get safely out of this snarl we will have done with mysteries forever. You must come as yourself, or not at all. And don't you dare to play Chinaman again, or I disown you forever."

Her courage was certainly reviving, for she laughed as she finished speaking, and shook her finger at him as he moved hurriedly away, down the road.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ORANGE ABLE HAS A STUNNING REVELATION.

IF Blackburn had known how closely the house was really watched, he would have been more cautious both in his leave taking and in his going away. Orange Able had thrown his whole soul into the pursuit of Nina, and stealthily drifted toward the house at all sorts of times. In fact, he could not have kept up his observations much longer without their coming into notice. The only thing that had saved him so far was the somewhat isolated position of the house.

He had seen Hilgarda hastening home, and had been drawn toward the cottage as certainly as the needle toward the pole.

He had made a study of concealment about the grounds, ever since the day that he had overheard the unfortunate conversation between the doctor and his sister; and just now was near enough to see the leave-taking, and even hear something of Nina's last words. He did not catch their meaning just then, though it came to him afterward with force enough. He had held several interviews with the supposed Ah Chung, when the latter had left the house in the evening, and so far had not lost faith in the pretended spy.

A little twinge of jealousy mingled with the gratification with which he viewed the progress that Levant was making; and he wondered if the agitation which Hilgarda had shown could by any possibility have come from jealousy on her part. He believed that up to this day Levant's attention had been toward the aunt rather than the niece.

As he crept away toward his line of retreat, which took him through the copse where he had by chance been hidden on that other important occasion, he nearly ran against a man who was advancing so cautiously that he gave no warning of his approach, and who was looking so intently in the direction of the almost invisible Blackburn that he had no eyes for the things that were nearer.

A smothered exclamation came from both men, as they discovered the presence of each other.

"The captain!" ejaculated the intruder.
"One-Eyed Edd!" aspirated Able, catching the man by the shoulder.

"What are you doing here? I gave you up as hanged a week ago."

"That's just what I did for myself. Couldn't come to time and had a narrow squeak of it. Garland's hounds were on the trail, and if I hadn't got a wink of it in time they would have had me, sure. I'm here now; and if the news I bring you has anything in it I would about as soon be somewhere else."

"Anything new in the hawk's nest?"

"Reckon there is, and the boys ought to know it. I came straight to you, after I thought I had my trail pretty well covered. Somehow, Garland has got wind of headquarters being in Broad Ax; and they do say he has come down here to look around a little. You know what that means?"

"Perhaps," said Able, briefly, and the other continued:

"It means that there is a man about that is no slouch. There were some papers in the mail that the Crosseys took charge of, a month or so ago; and the fellow that thinks he owns them is going to make things lively for the fellows that got them. I always did say it was a bad plan to monkey with the mails."

"The—deuce!" exclaimed Able. In his moments of higher exaltation he was apt to swear very mildly.

"And after the mail-bags were sifted Black Budlong threw them into the fire, to get them out of the way! There is no chance for a trade—worse luck!"

"Nary a chance. Their only hold is to get even; and when they can afford to bring a man like Dan Garland into the job it looks as though they were going to hit the turn, if the bank keeps on with the deal. He won't let go, if he has to keep on for a year. But, see here. Who was that chap you had your eyes on? You don't generally spot a man for fun; and there is something infernally familiar about him. If I hadn't seen the fellow die a year ago, dead open and shut, mind you, I would swear that I could place him."

"Dead open and shut things sometimes are not so sure as they might be. If you ever knew the man in the land of the living he is there yet. His name is Levant, and I knew him years ago, was in a little affair with him, that seems to have broke him all up. He might have been a big gun in the world if he had carried a little more savvy and sand."

"Levant? A doctor—in the navy once? On a commission, or something of that kind, down in Central America?"

"I suppose that is the man," said Orange, hesitatingly; the tone of his companion beginning to suggest some grave doubts.

"Doctor Simon Levant. How did you ever come to know him?"

"It was down with one of those little revolutionary flurries, where there is a chance to rise and mighty good pickings where a man keeps his eyes open and his fingers free, that I was working. I got the fever, and would have gone over sure if he had not turned up. He had left the commission, or something or other, and found me just at the right time. I am afraid he did not take much stock in me when I got around again; but all the same, I was not a dozen yards from him when he dropped. As he saved my life I would have liked to have done the same for him. As the next best thing I saw him buried, decently and in order."

"And yonder man looks like him?" queried Able, with a toss of the head in the direction that Blackburn had taken.

"Like enough to be his ghost."

"Then, by the fires of Hades, we have done more than the most, for we have spotted Dan Garland on the trail."

And to himself he softly added:

"And I have been giving myself away."

"Like as not," said Edd, looking curiously at his chief. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Kill him," answered Orange, between his set teeth.

"He has been playing the fool once too often; and if this is level truth you have been giving me it can be done without much risk. I just begin to see into the Chinaman's dodge. He picked me up both ways; and

put his own neck in a noose twice. If one way don't bring him, another will. But first, we will see where he is going to now. If we can pipe him to his hole, we may get it down on him still finer. Come on, and I will give you orders for to-night as we go along. There is no time to lose."

Orange was good as a trailer; he had taken especial note of the direction that Blackburn had taken, and he followed rapidly, soon striking the trail that led him directly away from Broad Ax.

By and by Mort was lost to sight in a thick copse of trees and bushes. When he reappeared it was in a totally different guise; and one that made Orange start. He was now the Harry Garland of the Happy Home saloon, who had stood by the doctor and Stephen Greene the night of the attempted lynching.

"He has shucked himself, sure enough," whispered One-Eyed Edd.

"And I'll give a century if he has left the Levant duds behind him," responded Able, a new and bright idea suddenly darting across his mind.

"Let him get a little offing, and we will see what we can find. We can take up the trail again, and I have an idea that he is on his way to the Red Horse. For some reason he has an eye on the owner—I cannot think it is altogether on account of his pretty daughter. Curse him; if it is, I'll have revenge enough on them all around when I make her Mrs. Able."

One-Eyed Edd waited somewhat impatiently. He would have preferred trying to get a shot at the man who was again so rapidly vanishing. It seemed to him that if Garland once got out of sight, now that they knew him, it might be a long time before they could find him again.

But Orange was inflexible—and he had his reward.

Concealed in the copse they found the disguise worn by Blackburn when personating Doctor Levant. He had hidden it well, and undoubtedly intended to abandon it forever.

"Just as I could have sworn. We have the shell, and if he don't look out a little brighter than even Dan Garland generally looks, we will use it on him in a way he will be sure to despise. Now then, to lay off the business. You think, Edd, that you would know that fellow again if you saw him?"

"If he keeps that shape. But Dan don't always look alike, as the boys have had occasion to occasionally lament. Next thing he may come at you as a blushing damsel of sixteen. When he paints his face and tosses his head, you would think him a little tin angel on tin wheels. That's the way he struck Pocket Johnny—and hung him, too."

"The hanging will be on the other side, if I can get him as foul as I expect to. But there is no time to waste. Whatever we are going to do must be done at once. You will have to make a trip out to the camp. I want the boys to be on hand, with horses handy, and ready for the hottest kind of work. We may have to raid the town—and if we do you will look out for the bank. But that part can be decided afterward."

If you get an eye on Garland in the shape you see him there, down him; but when these duds turn up on a man's back, look out how you point your guns. That man will probably be me. If you hurry up you can meet me on the south road, half a mile out, and I will give you the latest points, and orders for the night. And if you don't have the pleasure of knotting the rope around Dan Garland's neck, with all Broad Ax to say hurrah, it will be because you are too bashful for the job. I'll learn the hound that he can play the gentle Celestial once too often. So long. We'll meet later."

The two men separated, One-Eyed Edd to obey orders, and Orange Able to make other arrangements to further his plot against the doctor's household, and provide a very sultry evening for the supposed Dan Garland.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE RACKET AT THE RED HORSE.

IN spite of the confident way that Blackburn spoke to Nina, he did not feel altogether at ease in regard to matters at the Red Horse Mine.

He had been inquiring into the doctor's mining affairs, and had learned enough to know that if Riley was as bad as his repu-

tation, Farley might expect trouble at any time. There was too much expense and loss of time about the courts for a man like Riley, unless he was meantime enjoying the fruits of both claims; and he would be apt to serve his own processes, without much regard to any other law than his own sweet will. As that was the fashion in Broad Ax, public opinion would probably be neutral until a decision, *vi et armis*, was reached, and then would most likely be on the winning side.

There was some little personal sympathy for the doctor, but the general drift of opinion so far, if there was any, did not particularly favor his position.

He was not supposed to be the sort of man that should meddle in mining affairs, anyhow; and if he could not keep out, then he ought not to have bought in so near to Ready Riley.

In the latter view, Mort Blackburn—who knew all about mines and mining matters—was inclined to concur; but if there was a chance to get on the side of the doctor he certainly did not intend to be neutral. In the few moments of her surprise and terror he had managed to get a good deal nearer to Nina than she knew; and he believed that he was going to have her firmly on his side. If, then, he could only get Doctor Farley to give him a respectful and unprejudiced hearing, he felt pretty certain to win. Whether or no the doctor needed help, he was going to be on the ground to see.

Much as he had professed to dislike Morton Blackburn, Farley would have been glad enough to have had him at his back when the crisis came, that afternoon.

The account given to Wickfield, by the fugitive, was nearer to the truth than Blackburn had been willing to admit; and was not willfully falsified. He did not enter into the minutiae of the affair, which might have explained much, and he erred considerably in thinking that Greene was taken off his guard, or that the people of the Red Horse had the worst of it when he left, though the men from the War Chief outnumbered them, two to one.

During the absence of the doctor the operations at the Red Horse had stopped almost altogether. Had it not been for the jostle which his wits had received it is more than likely that the doctor would also have been willing to wait until it could be seen what sorts of lengths Riley was ready to go in his claim on the property they certainly believed was their own.

But the doctor as he was, had no idea of giving up, even if he did not care to do anything that might seem likely to provoke a quarrel. He got Stephen Greene to look after things; hired a few more men that he thought could be relied on; and was watching how things moved with his revolvers in his hands. There were not many men behind him, but if they all staid with him he thought that he could at least give the Ready man a surprise, about the time he attempted some over tact that looked toward the taking of the mine.

The crisis was not expected for several days yet, since Greene had been able to gather some intelligence as to the progress that was being made in the War Chief, and had figured it down closely, as he thought, as to the time that the work on Riley's mine would cross that in the Red Horse.

But it takes a good engineer, with measurements, and angles, and all that, to figure out such things with exactness. The doctor and his foreman had just been deciding that the watch at midnight must be kept with military exactness, when they found that the time for action had already arrived.

The two were standing near to the end of the tunnel, where four or five men were leisurely working, and discussing what were probably Riley's plans, when there was a break in the wall, and Riley revealed himself.

"Fair warning, in there," shouted a voice, with which every one save Greene was well enough acquainted to recognize at once.

"You are on the War Chief lead, and if you get in the way of our blast you must take the consequences. Speak up, there! We don't want to see a man hurt, but we are going on with our work, regardless."

There was no answer from the Red Horse; where the men as if by instinct had extin-

guished all their lights at the very first sound made by the intruders, that reached their ears.

"All the worse for you if you sulk," continued the same voice.

"If we knew where you are we might keep from hurting some one. As it is, look out all."

It was no blast, but a discharge of firearms that followed, though in that confined space it sounded loud enough for anything. One man who happened to be nearer to the mouth of the tunnel than the break in the wall was grazed sharply by a bullet, and quit work immediately. He was the fugitive that had carried confusion and dismay to Miss Hilgarda.

Just as the flash lit up the tunnel the doctor and Greene flung themselves to the floor. Had they not done so the consequences might have been serious, since they heard the hiss of several bullets, as they hurtled over. As it was, no one was hurt; but, as a profound silence followed, the fugitive might well have thought Farley done for if he had seen him falling, by the momentary flash.

After a little there was the sound of crow-bars, drills and picks at work. Evidently the break was not sufficient for the men of the War Chief to make an entrance, and they were in haste to enlarge it.

It was a trying position for the doctor to be placed in. In spite of his intention to resist any invasion of his property he was averse to shedding blood, save as a last resort. As Ready Riley seemed to have no such compunctions it was hardly advisable to point out the spot where he and his men were crouching by attempting a parley. A reassuring pressure of the hand by Greene, who was not at all flurried at the sudden attack, served to strengthen his determination; and he waited in suspense, uncertain what would be the move to make when the invaders succeeded in breaking through.

In this way some time passed, and Ira Wickfield was hearing the news long enough before Ready Riley had succeeded in making the opening practicable for entrance. And even when the wall of rock was beaten down sufficiently for a man to pass through, Riley hesitated.

The silence puzzled him somewhat. He had judged that there would be some reply to the assault, that would give an idea of the force that was in the Red Horse, and what was its disposition. He did not think there were more than a couple men at work, but he knew that the doctor was in the mine. From what he had seen of him, he was inclined to believe Farley would either weakly temporize, or beat a hasty retreat. He certainly had not attempted the one; the question was whether he had done the other.

So more time was lost; for though he had given warning in the first place, he did not intend to do so again. When he struck, it would be suddenly and without flourish of trumpets.

It was like an age, the time that Dr. Farley crouched there in the silent darkness, waiting for an attack. It was a long time.

But at last Riley was ready in fact.

"Steady, now; they are coming," whispered Greene.

"Keep where you are, and out of the muss. The fools can't get in that way. I could salivate every one of them before they knew where we were. Ah!"

The opening was little more than wide enough to admit the passage of a man. Through it suddenly bounded Riley, a torch in one hand, a revolver in the other.

And then, just as promptly, the pistol of Stephen Greene cracked, the torch fell from the hand of Riley, while at the same time a vivid light from a powerful "bull's-eye" streamed down the tunnel and fell upon Riley, standing nearest to the men of the Red Horse, and his men crowding through the orifice behind him.

"Hands up, Mr. Riley!" said Greene, speaking sharp and stern. "All the ore in the Red Horse won't count for a cent with you if I pick trigger again. We are here, on our own ground and don't propose that it shall be jumped by any living man. I have you lined, and I am good for you and six more in fourteen seconds by the watch. Men don't call me Seven-Shot Steve for nothing. When I once begin to pull, I give all I have

in the box if there is a man left to take it. Steady, as you are. It's as bad to try to fall back as to go ahead. This thing has got to be settled between man and man now; and after this everything at odds is to go to the courts. You sabbe?"

The surprisers were surprised. The bright light made their leader an elegant mark; and it revealed those behind him so plainly that no one cared to try a snap-shot down the tunnel. At the ring of truth in the voice of Greene, even Ready Riley was staggered.

A voice behind him completed his discomfort, and it was Morton Blackburn that was speaking.

"We have you foul, Mr. Riley, very foul; and you may as well come off the perch. What my amiable friend at the other end of the line may happen to spare, will be cleaned up by yours truly, if this thing goes any further. You have heard the terms. Knuckle down to them, or else make a move. And if you do the last, out of the wet you go."

CHAPTER XXX.

MORE THINGS SETTLED THAN ONE.

THE voice in the rear was what finished the work; up went Riley's hands.

"All right. Up it is. I'm Riley, ready to go in; and I'm Riley, ready to go out when the time comes to step down. I saw you shoot once, Mr. Greene, and that is enough for me. The boys will all stand to what I say. If that is what you want, come forward and have a little talk. I reckon you have something to propose, and you don't ask an unconditional surrender. If we settle this thing now, it stays settled till the courts put one of us in and the other out, for good."

"That sounds like wise talk, and I'll be glad to hear some more of it," said Greene, stepping forward without the hesitation of an instant.

"Here are the facts and figures. You and Farley are not exactly the same kind of men, but between you, you have a thing good enough to feed all the lawyers from here to Frisco—if you are fools enough to do it. But if you run in double harness you won't have a bad thing for both. I know, for I have been looking it all over. That idea don't come from Farley; but all the same, it is my proposition."

"Yes, it does come from Farley," said the doctor, crowding forward.

"It is good, solid sense by the yard, and if we don't both take the hint, we deserve to be shot."

"Put her there, pard; put her there!" exclaimed Riley, extending his hand.

"I hate to be beat, but I know a good thing when I see it, as well as Mr. Greene. It's a pity that no one thought of this before; but to tell the truth, doctor, I did not exactly sabbe your sort. We'll run this thing together, and just make Broad Ax get up and howl."

"And now, where is the gentleman that came into the game at the last stage? We ought to do something for him, though, so far as I know, he is a rank outsider."

"Oh, virtue is its own reward," said Morton, in answer to this appeal of the doctor.

"I only came on to let you know that Ira was on the way, followed by divers men with shot-guns. When I got here I couldn't resist the temptation to chip, and if I did you any good you are full and welcome. I reckon that is the bold Wickfield, now."

Sure enough, down the tunnel tumbled a man in breathless haste, guided by the light of the torches and lanterns that were now being relit.

"I thought I was well out of it at first," sputtered Ira, as he drew near; "but I couldn't stay away, when I thought of what might be going on here. Why—hello! What's to pay, now?"

He had just caught sight of Riley and his men, standing amicably enough by the side of the doctor.

It only took a few words of explanation to inform him of the deal that was in progress, and he was a trifle better pleased than any one else, though the deputation behind him, that he had hastily gathered up on a promise of large wages and a free fight, received the information a little later with loud applause.

Then the men went back to their places in the mines, while the principals returned to Broad Ax, gathering in the doctor's office,

talking the matter over further, and arranging the terms of the contract they were about to make. Blackburn, still unrecognized in his true character, went as far as the town, walking with Wickfield, but refused to go into the discussion, though Farley had shown nothing of the distrust of him which he seemed to have a few nights before.

"Well," thought Blackburn, as he strolled down the street alone; "of course there is a difference between being the owner of the War Chief and yours truly; but if Farley has got far enough advanced to take on Riley as a partner, there may be hope for me yet. Confound him, why don't he give Mort Blackburn a chance?"

There was something in the idea that made Blackburn more hopeful. When anything so improbable as Riley being admitted as a partner into the Red Horse could happen, there was no saying how soon the regeneration of the doctor would reach so far as to take the young man as a son-in-law. At the same time he recognized the fact that it would have to be after another great crisis like that at the mine. What the doctor there said about Harry Garland would not be apt to weigh much when the claims of Morton Blackburn were under consideration.

As no doubt the doctor would be fully occupied for a time, and might forget to send word to his family, Mort thought it would be a good time to see Nina once more, both to tell her the result of operations at the mine, and to still further plead his cause. If he found her in the same humor she was in when he left her he might materially advance his interests by some further conversation.

As he neared the house he saw Miss Hilgarda leave it in haste, and hurry along the street, directly toward him.

As she had never met him in his present garb he did not suppose the lady was trying to interview him, but suspected at once that she was leaving the house to obtain some information as to how things had gone at the mine. In his elation over the satisfactory close of the difficulty it was more than likely Farley would forget all about the ones at home, or imagine they knew nothing about the attempt to jump the Red Horse. Here was his chance. He approached Hilgarda with his hand to his hat.

"If you are looking for Doctor Farley, miss, you will find him at his office. Everything has been amicably settled at the mine, and they have all gone to the office to talk it over. I do not think any one was seriously hurt, though it might be worth your while to inquire. In the excitement anything like a slight wound is not spoken of or thought about until it is all over."

"Thank you, sir. Did you notice whether Mr. Wickfield was with the others? He went out to the mine as soon as he heard of the affair, and I am afraid that something has happened to him or he would certainly have sent us word."

"I think you will find him there with the rest," replied Blackburn; but before the words were fairly out of his mouth she had nodded anxiously, and was hastening down the street.

If Blackburn had not held the opinion that he might be better engaged he would have followed, just to see the meeting, and find out if his suspicions were correct.

Her entrance into the office was a surprise to the doctor, in more ways than one. He had actually forgotten all about his sister and daughter and that they might be feeling an anxiety on his account. Since the affray he had been too busily engaged to think of such minor matters.

Miss Hilgarda had been thinking so long of the terrible conflict that was no doubt going on at the Red Horse, that she could see nothing but blood and corpses. The casual bit of information, just picked up, was entirely too good to be reliable; and she wanted to test it at once, in order to satisfy herself that it was not a prelude to hearing the worst. If it was so, why had not Ira Wickfield sent the intelligence. She knew that he had led out his little army to the rescue, and that he was aware how anxious she and Nina must be. It was not strange that her brother had no more thought for his family, but if she had not thought better things of Ira she never would have allowed herself to look upon him as a—friend.

So it was that the nearer Hilgarda got to the office the more excited she became. On the outside she found no sign that there was anything unusual going on within, or that the office was even tenanted. There was no admiring crowd, to give an ovation to the returning heroes, and no excitement about the streets. She shivered as she thought struck her that it was the silence of the grave, this unusual ignorance or apathy of Broad Ax. She burst into the room, gazed around wildly, taking in every one of the faces that turned toward her in a startled manner, and then, with a little cry of jubilation, plumped herself squarely into Ira's arms, and fainted dead away.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the doctor. "What did she go to Ira for? Wasn't I the nearer?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

"I COULD HAVE TOLD YOU SO."

If the doctor did not understand the meaning of what had just happened, it is most likely that Ira Wickfield did. He certainly turned very red, at hearing Farley's wondering exclamation, but did not offer to allow the doctor to relieve him of his burden. He bore the young lady to the lounge in the further corner of the room, and deposited her there very carefully.

"I must say we have acted like brutes in this matter. Miss Hilgarda was at the store when the news came of trouble at the mine. She heard the garbled account, in which you were declared to be dead, and the rest of the men as good as corpses. She knows I was at the mine since, and it is probably to reproach me for not sending her word at once of your safety that she has just fainted in my arms. We should be beaten for our negligence. How do you suppose your daughter feels, Farley? One of us had better go to the house at once. Miss Hilgarda will be recovered in a moment."

The fainting spell was not at all alarming, and the lady would have been herself again in a moment or two, without any of the ministrations of the conscience-stricken Ira and the doctor. The eyes that soon opened rested on Mr. Wickfield with a reproachful stare.

"Whatever brother did, I certainly did not think that you would forget us," she murmured, sadly.

"So long did we wait in vain for news, that I was certain you were dead. The shock at seeing you all alive and unhurt was so great that it unnerved me. Now I must go back to Nina. Poor girl. She is no doubt half-dead with fear."

If she could have seen the young lady at that identical moment she would not have thought her in much danger of death through fear or anything else.

She was listening to Mort Blackburn's account of the great double victory which had been achieved at the mine, and her eyes were brightening as she learned that once more her father had been indebted to her lover for very timely aid.

"And so, he asked what he could do for you?" said Nina, after she had entirely mastered the subject.

"I think I would have spoken up at once. He was just in the box then when he could not object to you on the grounds of your past, since it was what fitted you for the present."

"I had half a notion to do so, but I didn't care to show what sort of cards I had been holding before all the outsiders. There is nothing makes a player more touchy than to have the crowd get the laugh on him for throwing to the middle because of a sheer bluff. And the time had not come yet, either. I may be wrong, but I think that there is something to come yet, that will be better met if your father knows nothing of my foolish little games. As I told you before, when we begin to own up we will have to tell him of Orange Able along with the rest. And I don't want to do that until that unworthy citizen has developed the full size of his hand, and the way he means to play his game. If the balance of the developments don't come to-night, or within a day or so, I am very much mistaken. I am to meet him to-night, as Ah Chung, with a batch of information from the mansion, and I will see if I cannot pump him dry. He

seems to me to be a man who would talk if the proper suction was applied."

"But you must not keep your engagement. I will not have it," said Nina, firmly.

"I do not want you to run the risk, for one thing, and I do not think it necessary, for another. If I could I would prefer to keep the knowledge that you have been an inmate of this house from father. If you assume that disguise again, something tells me it will all be found out."

"Don't see how I can fairly get out of it. If I don't put in an appearance Orange will be apt to get after the original Jacobs with a very sharp stick. It is a fact that my presence here was only really possible through the protection of the king-pin of the camp. Some one would have been objecting long before this if Orange had not whispered around that their hands were to be kept off. And I had hard enough work to convince the gentleman at present in the kitchen that I could guarantee his safety. He is woefully afraid of a meeting with a Broad Ax committee."

"Let him stay here all night, then Able will think he has missed him, and spend the time in looking for him in his haunts at Hard Hack, and to-morrow, if we can see no other way out of it, we will have him leave the country."

"That may be the best plan," said Morton, thoughtfully.

"If Orange once makes up his mind that he has no further use for Ah Chung, he will be as likely to kill him by way of good-by, as to give him the wages he has been promising. I will see the Chinaman, and tell him to stay here until he hears from me. If I say so, you can be sure that he will not move. He has the greatest respect for my judgment, besides having a little debt of gratitude that he does not think he has entirely canceled."

"See him; and do not linger very long. Hilgarda will be apt to frighten father with an account of my agitation, and bring him here as soon as he can get away. It will be as well that you do not meet him if you do not wish to make any explanation at present."

"I will be off in a jiffy. I don't care to meet him, and still less do I want the others to see me, if he brings them along, as he is likely to do. The wonder was that they did not come directly here in the first place. You needn't trouble yourself showing me the way. I think that I know it well enough. *Au revoir.*"

Morton was laughing when he skipped along toward the kitchen; and there was a flush on Nina's face, as she shook her finger after him in mock anger. It is not far from ear to cheek, and when Morton ceased to whisper, perhaps his lips wandered of their own accord.

The stay in the kitchen was brief, and Morton took good care to stand so that he could not be seen from the windows, in case there was any watcher outside. He did not say anything to alarm Ah Chung, but simply requested him to remain in the house until he heard from him again. If he, Blackburn, did not appear that evening he would, early in the morning, and meantime would see that the Chinaman was protected.

Ah Chung bobbed his head, and said, "Allee lighty;" before he could add anything else Morton was gone.

Just in time did he get out of sight, for the doctor was almost at hand. There was no reason why the conference at his office should not stand adjourned, since an amicable arrangement had been reached, and it was too soon to draw up any papers on the subject. The only difficulty was for each one to think of exactly what he did want, since the other two were willing that he should have the earth. It was all the better, now that such an amicable state of affairs had been reached, that they should take time to think it all up. The doctor proposed another conference at his house that evening, when papers might be drawn up to show the exact nature of the partnership. With this understanding Riley and Stephen Greene went one way, and the others another. The doctor led the way, and Ira Wickfield escorted Hilgarda.

The two were not saying anything that they thought the rest of the world should not hear, and yet, if they had only known

it, they were about as near to love-making as even Nina and Morton Blackburn were at that very minute—and that was saying a good deal.

They came on very much at their leisure; so much so that Farley was almost out of their sight as he entered his front door. He was in the best of humor, even if he had begun to suspect that there was something in the way of one of his schemes that he had not seriously considered when it had been hinted to him.

Nina met him with effusion, but she could not, of course, show the excitement that her aunt had done. It was not in her nature, anyhow; and then, as she had already received the full particulars of everything that had occurred at the mine, there was no anxiety, and little curiosity to work up her feelings.

The doctor was not excited a bit. As soon as he found that Nina did not expect an apology or an explanation, he was ready to drop the mine business, and begin on something else.

"My dear," he said, to Nina's surprise and amusement, "I believe that I have discovered that Hilgarda is actually in love with Mr. Wickfield."

"And I could have told you so long ago. Why didn't you listen when I was trying to hint? What now is to become of me?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

DR. LEVANT BRINGS THE LATEST REPORTS.

The doctor looked blankly at his daughter, until it struck him that she was making fun of him. Then he began to smile too.

"Perhaps you are right. I was foolish not to listen to you, if I could not see the signs of the times. It places me in a bad predicament, does it not? Really, I am afraid I shall have to call Wickfield out. The idea of his having trifled with the holiest affections of my daughter! The man is a conceited villain."

It was not hard to see that the doctor did not mean a word of what he was saying, and for the very good reason that he knew the intelligence would be anything but distasteful to Nina. Of course, he did not think that Ira had acted altogether right in the matter, but it was all the better to find out that he was that sort of a man. If Ira Wickfield would allow himself to be forced or led into paying attentions to Nina while really in love with Hilgarda, the doctor did not care to have him as a son-in-law; even if he would make no objections at receiving him as Hilgarda's suitor. Perhaps, and that was the most likely explanation to the doctor, he had not known his own mind. He said as much to Nina.

"For that matter, I don't suppose that either of them did, or do, even yet. I suspected them of having more interest in each other than they were willing to admit, and, as I have just told you, hinted it to you the other day, as gently as I could. If you had been a woman you would have understood what I meant. I thought that perhaps you might be willing to take kindly to the idea, and change your plans, if you got an inkling of the truth."

"Never mind about that. If it should turn out that they know their own minds at last, we will say nothing about the past, but give them to understand that we are highly pleased. That is the most sensible course to take in such affairs. It never does any good to be obstinate when you once find out that young folks have made up their minds. I understand from Hilgarda that Ah Chung has returned. Hope that we will have no more trouble about him for a time. I do not think there is much danger of interference, if he does not make himself obnoxiously prominent in the town."

"He thinks he is in danger, however. He has heard something; for though he is going about his work, he is evidently uneasy, and I think intends to remain here to-night."

"All the better. He will be on hand with an early breakfast in the morning. Riley will be over here to-night, along with Greene, and perhaps several others, to talk it over a little more. To-morrow we are going over both mines together. We have hit indications, and if things turn out as well as we hope, we may be bonanza princes yet. Have you seen anything of Levant to-day?"

"He was here when the news of the affair

at the mine was received. He came for the purpose of saying good-by. He is leaving Broad Ax, and may not see any of us again. He left his regards for you in case he did not."

"Too bad, too bad! I wanted to get him interested in the mines. He is really an expert of no mean order, though he does not vaunt his knowledge. And then, I was in hopes that we should have the pleasure of his society for a time longer. He is interesting in his conversation, even if you are inclined to ridicule the idea of his making an acceptable gallant. But here is Hilgarda at last. Say nothing of what I have told you, and we will let them take their own time and place for making the discovery that we have done."

Of course the doctor was saying a good deal more than he meant when he talked about giving people their own way in matters of the heart. Nina knew that liberality of feeling did not extend to her and Morton Blackburn. But it was a hopeful sign that he was bending before such a theory—the time might soon come when he would break altogether. Ira did not come into the house, and nothing was said to Hilgarda in regard to the extreme solicitude she had shown for the safety of Mr. Wickfield.

Ah Chung distinguished himself in the meal that was presently set before them. The doctor said that he had improved a great deal during his vacation, which made Nina wince. Much as she had opposed the appearance of Blackburn in the kitchen, she wanted to consider him beyond criticism in everything that he undertook.

She did not argue the case, however, for she was afraid if she did she might make some unintended revelations. But she thought that if the time ever did come for plain speaking there would be a grand laugh at the expense of the doctor. It would even be some sort of a consolation in case she eventually had to give her lover up. What a long-continued joke it would be when she gradually explained to her father the mystifications of which he had been the victim.

The meal was over, the evening was well advanced. Mr. Riley had called—and being on his good behavior was decidedly more ready than rough. Ira Wickfield had also dropped in, bringing with him the superintendent of the Red Horse, who listened to everything with his smile as pronounced as ever, but offered few suggestions. He seemed to think that it was his business to listen only, and lay up what he heard for future guidance. For the time the doctor had forgotten all about Dr. Levant, and the scientific hobbies that had so interested him, and was entirely absorbed in the mines. Just now Ready Riley was as good company as he wanted. When there was a knock at the door he hardly noticed it. Nina, with a presentiment of evil, was the one to hasten to answer it.

As she had half-expected, Morton Blackburn was there. He came in the guise of Harry Garland, and he came in haste.

"I am afraid Ah Chung is in for trouble," he said, in a low tone, as he saw that it was Nina who confronted him.

"It was only by chance that I got the hint, and I could not learn any particulars, except that a rough by the name of Crockly has been organizing a gang of tough citizens. I want to see the Chinaman. As I came along I imagined that there were several men on the watch, but I think I can spirit him away. It will not be safe to try Hard Hack, for if they really want him it is because Orange Able says so, and they would be apt to look for him there, if they could not find him here. Try and get him to come out and see me, without alarming any of the rest. It may be all a hoax, for the crowd may have something else in view."

This was easier said than done, for, unfortunately, Dr. Farley came forward to see who was the caller, and recognized him at once.

"Ah, Garland! So you accepted the invitation, and came around after all. Glad to see you. Come in. We are having a talk over things, but there is nothing private about it. Perhaps you can give us a wrinkle or two; for, if I am not mistaken, you know as much about mining as the best of us."

The invitation of the doctor compelled a reorganization of Blackburn's plan. He could not well go away without explaining what he called for, and as yet he did not wish to awaken any excitement. He took the chances of Nina giving Ah Chung his message, and providing an opportunity for a brief interview. It would be time enough then to withdraw. As this was his last appearance as Harry Garland, he did not much care what was thought in case he took an unceremonious leave. With some few words of explanation—which really explained nothing at all—he went in.

It was something of a puzzle why he should be so cordially received, even if he had been of some little service in bringing the dispute between the proprietors of the Red Horse and the War Chief to a satisfactory termination. If he had known that he was supposed to be Dan Garland, the great detective, and that the doctor was only giving him a chance to view him in his domestic relations, he would have been more than surprised.

After a little Nina left the room. Morton was sure that she had gone to look for Ah Chung, and if he could have found an excuse would have left also. He was growing somewhat nervous over the lapse of time, and was anxious for her return. Before she had been gone many minutes, however, there were others there who were almost as anxious as he was. Near at hand they heard shouts, yells, and the discharge of firearms, while without waiting for answer to his knock, the exact counterfeit of Dr. Levant rushed into the room, exclaiming:

"Look out for yourself, Farley. The committee are here, after your Chinaman, and it is a chance if they do not make ugly work for you as well. I just heard of what was going on, and came to warn you. Another moment, and they will be here. I think they have Ah Chung now. Cannot something be done for him?"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE COMMITTEE ARRIVE.

In such matters, and in a time of excitement, dress goes a good way. If Nina had been there it is possible that she, even, might have been puzzled. Of those in the room, only Morton Blackburn suspected anything; and he, of course, had the best of reasons.

Knowing where that garb had been left he was pretty sure that no honest man could have found it, and the only person who would be apt to use it would be Orange Able. And if there was a movement against Ah Chung, Orange was most likely to be at the bottom of it. The reason, too, was not hard to guess at. The fellow no doubt had discovered that the same man had been masquerading as the Chinaman and as Dr. Levant. If Ah Chung was out of the way there was no one to suspect Orange, so long as he carried the character of Levant to the life. He was here for mischief, and unless it was of a desperate kind would hardly have dared intrude on the doctor when the latter was so well backed. From the moment he had passed the doorway, Orange Able was lined by the derringer in Morton Blackburn's left side-pocket.

As might be expected, the sudden announcement was an exciting shock to Dr. Farley. The noise without would perhaps have given him an inkling of what was coming, but not at once. The words of the man whom he supposed to be Levant left nothing to be reasoned out or inferred. The committee, which he had begun to think was a myth, was really on the way, and it was coming after a manner that made him wish that the feminine part of the household was somewhere else.

He looked around at his visitors.

"Gentlemen, I should be sorry to draw you into a brawl, and do not ask your support in this thing, in which I have, perhaps, been something to blame. But though I cautioned the Chinaman, whom for some days I have been having in my service as a cook, that he would serve me at some risk, I had no idea it could really be so serious a thing as the sounds outside, and the report of my friend, Levant, would seem to indicate. I would be perfectly willing to bow to public opinion, if it really demanded that the fellow should leave town; but if any-

thing like lynching is attempted, I shall defend him to the last gasp."

"Then do not involve the ladies in the unpleasant difficulties that may follow, if you attempt to carry out that determination," said the supposed Levant, speaking with a great deal of earnestness.

"Of course, at the outset, the mob would intend to treat them with all possible politeness; but you know what chances there are that something serious may happen. And if blood is once drawn, the mob becomes practically blinded to everything. As yet the way is open, and I would advise that you allow me to escort them to the Western Continent. They will be safe there, and I will return, then, to see if I can be of any service here. Answer quickly, for the excitement without seems to be rising, and the crowd drawing near."

"You are right, Levant. If they attempt to take the Chinaman from the house, this is no place for the girls. They had better go with you at once. They would handicap my efforts here. Nina! Hilgarda! Go with the doctor! There is no time for further explanation. With you away, the rest of us will be able to bring the crowd to reason before they can force an entrance, if they are bent on carrying their threats to that extreme."

"Oh, where is Nina?" exclaimed Hilgarda, looking excitedly around. "Ira, search for her. She was here but a moment ago, and now, I am afraid, is out of the house, perhaps to find out the meaning of this approaching throng. Foolish girl! She does not know the danger."

The doctor had not noticed the absence of his daughter. It excited him more than the coming of the mob. He ran to the door that led to the kitchen and called:

"Nina!"

Nina did not answer; and a shout for Ah Chung brought no response.

"I have an idea," said Stephen Greene, quietly, "that your Chinaman has made an effort to escape, and is in the hands of the mob already. Perhaps your daughter has gone to see what she can do for him. It may be as well to investigate. Keep together, gentlemen, all you that intend to back Farley's hand. You can't raise all Broad Ax for such a picnic as lynching a Chinaman; and if we show a strong nucleus the friends of law and order may rally around it. If they don't, I think we could make it very unhealthy for the lynchers ourselves, if we only half tried."

"Together it is," shouted Riley. "Right or wrong, Farley's my pard now, and I reckon Ready Riley will stick by him, if it takes a wheel. But we don't want to fool time here if we want to get your heathen out of the hands of the toughs. If I could only get word to the boys at the mine we would give them fun in earnest. I guess we can make it interesting as it is."

Together they all crowded out to the door, from where a view could be obtained of the crowd.

The idea of Stephen Greene was correct.

When Nina stole out into the kitchen she found that Ah Chung had made himself scarce. Either he had got wind of what was coming, or his quickened intuitions had revealed to him his danger; and he was trying to steal away in the direction of Hard Hack Gulch.

He had not gone twenty rods before two or three men, who had been lying in wait to prevent any such move, gave a hallo. Had it not been for this the approach to the house would have been made in a much more respectful manner, but, at the shout, the main body of the mob, which had just got in hearing distance, broke ranks with a wild yell, and came on pell-mell.

At the first cry Ah Chung realized his danger, and turned, to try to regain the house he had just left. If there was any chance for help it was there, and he had deliberately broken the orders of the only man in whom he had any confidence, by leaving the house without his permission.

But it was easier to think of returning than it was to put the thought into effect. A dozen men were between him and the cottage, and coming toward him with a reckless haste that evidently meant business.

The Chinaman was fleet of foot, however,

and very much in earnest. He made a little detour, as though he intended to seek the center of Broad Ax, and then attempted to double back.

The mob was scattered by the move, but it was not thrown off. Whichever way Ah Chung turned, a man was in front of him. Here and there he darted, and as often he found himself almost in the arms of an enemy.

The yelling, the shouting, the cursing, resembled a phonogram from pandemonium; and the bullets that now and then whistled over or past him, added to his fright.

He held on gamely as long as he could. As he did not offer to defend himself in any way except with his heels, the chase became better than a fox-hunt to the fierce crowd. The shooting was done to harass, or excite, or turn him—and not to harm. There were even a few bets made between some of the human hounds as to who would be entitled to the brush when they had run him down.

But the fellow gave them a hard chase, and at one time it looked as though he might at least reach the house before he could be overtaken. With fair play he would have done so.

Though the sport was exciting, it was also aggravating. Some of the men that he had dodged the oftenest, out of whose hands he had slipped with eel-like facility, could stand it no longer. Without an effort at a detaining grasp, two of them dashed in from opposite sides just as Ah Chung had successfully dodged a third; and striking together, brought him down by a couple of heavy strokes on the head.

It was the closing part of this scene that Nina was watching from the kitchen door; and as a dozen hands began to drag the half-insensible Chinaman toward the copse of trees to the rear of the cottage, she stepped boldly out among the lynchers.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DR. LEVANT MAKES HIS LAST EFFORT.

WHEN the trouble with Ah Chung first began, Nina was frightened enough. All that she had ever heard or read of the way in which the Chinamen were treated in some of the mining-camps where their presence was undesired, came into her mind. She had no doubt that the poor fellow would be murdered before her eyes.

As the game went on, and she watched as if fascinated the play that Ah Chung was making for his life, her nerves grew calmer, her courage returned, and she vowed that she would make at least one effort to help him. When, finally, he was being dragged away to what she was certain was execution, she sprung from the little porch, where she had been hidden from view in the deep shadow that it threw, and ran fleetly toward the crowd.

So far she had not thought of any danger to herself. Though it takes some time to describe it, the chase had not lasted long, and by the time her first agitation was over it was too late, as she thought, to seek assistance from the house, even if the presence of her father and his friends could do any good.

She did not know that there were eyes on her the moment she stepped into view, and that this was a scheme that concerned her as nearly as it did the man from China-side. As she advanced toward the crowd a sharp whistle rung out, and, before she could draw back or avoid them, three or four men were in front of her, who, without seeming to wish to interfere, so hampered her movements that it was impossible for her to proceed.

"Please stand aside," she exclaimed, speaking to the men with more courage than she felt. Though not a word had been spoken she divined that it was their purpose to hinder her movements. If she had known their further purpose she might not have spoken so confidently.

The nearest man turned, seemed to give a start at seeing her, and answered her:

"This ain't no place fur you, miss. I ain't keerin' ter see it myself. Ther doctor oughtn't ter let yer git inter this crowd, no-how. This way, miss. Yer can't git back ther way yer come; but foller me, an' I'll take yer round all right."

The fellow was bluff and rough, but Nina

did not for a moment doubt his sincerity. Had she been willing to give up without at least one more effort she would have followed him without hesitation. It was not fear of him that made her turn away with the intention of pushing through in some way.

"Don't be a fool, miss. It's dangerous ter monkey with that gang when they have their dander up. This way. Here comes yer friends, an' they'll say ther same thing. It's time fur you all ter be movin' out ov this ef you don't want ter see more blood on ther grass than ther blasted heathen bez in his carkiss."

With gentle violence the fellow caught her arm, drawing her back and away from the house, as a man in the garb of Doctor Levant came rushing out and toward her.

"Foolish, willful girl!" exclaimed this man, as he caught her other arm. "Would you work not only mischief to yourself, but ruin to your friends? What is the Chinaman to you? Leave it to your father to rescue him. He will attend to that while I see you in safety to the Western Continent. Quick! Do not delay or you may spoil all."

She looked back, and, as if to confirm his words, she saw her father rushing toward the mob. For the present she was carried away with his eagerness, and did not stop to think that this might be Dr. Levant, but it certainly was not Morton Blackburn. She yielded somewhat to his grasp, and suffered herself to be hurried away from what seemed to be the point of danger.

Then, once more there was a whistle, and this time she understood it for the signal that it was. Three or four horsemen came pushing toward her, halting as they reached her side.

"Here you are!" exclaimed the doubly fictitious Levant, suddenly seizing her in his arms, and giving a toss that landed her in the arms of the nearest of the horsemen.

"Follow your orders, and away with her. I will join you within half an hour."

"All right, captain. Finish the clean-up here, and you will find all serene on the hill. So long, and we'll look for you later."

The horsemen wheeled, they put spurs to the animals they bestrode, and all dashed off—save one.

There was the crack of a revolver; the horse of the man who held Nina in his arms gave a wild plunge, and came to the ground with a lumbering crash. There was no time to waste in efforts that by some chance might fail. Mort Blackburn's eyes had never been off of the man in disguise. He had followed close at his heels, and, when the time came, promptly shot the horse through the spine. Then he flung himself on Orange Able, and before a soul could interfere the two were rolling on the ground, locked together in a furious struggle.

The horsemen had started fairly, and at speed. At the sound of the pistol they halted; but they were some rods away. As they attempted to retrace their steps there was a sharp cry:

"Halt, there, you Crosseyes! Up with your hands! We have you lined, and the first man who tries to kick goes under. Oh, we have you very foul, and you may as well surrender."

It was Stephen Greene who spoke, but his words were not an empty boast. When the hands of the horsemen did not go up, in the true sense of the words, but each held a weapon as the outlaws looked around for the speaker, there was a sudden volley, followed by a charge of half a dozen men, who had the Crosseyes where they were wanted before they had fairly time to look for an enemy. And, meantime, the fingers of Stephen Greene were closing on the neck of Orange Able in a vicious sort of way, that indicated wonderful strength and a fair amount of practice.

The discharge of firearms, and the loud voices, attracted attention, in spite of the fact that there was an unexpected liveliness about the proceedings in the copse.

Some of the lynchers were in earnest; some simply wanted a frolic, while others understood that the affair was entirely secondary to the more important plans of Orange Able. These latter understood that while Ah Chung was not to be allowed to speak, there was to be no great haste in his taking off. Dr. Farley was first to be drawn to the spot of execution,

and the attention of every one riveted there as long as possible. In the end, the Chinaman must die, whether by the rope or the bullet was immaterial. Chance might determine the fate of the doctor. If he put himself too far and too vigorously forward, it was probable that he would die with the man he was defending. In any event, Orange Able believed that he would have full revenge for the way the doctor had treated him, when he made his advances.

The plan had been working to a charm. The blows Ah Chung had received had rendered him speechless for the time being; and when the doctor and his friends came into the open air, Levant was allowed to follow alone after Nina, while Riley and the doctor struck straight in to the rescue of the Chinaman.

The presence of Riley, and the boss of the Red Horse, had not been counted on, and at first was not noticed. When the doctor came dashing into the crowd, shouting to them to hold a moment until they could hear him, he was hustled this way and that without any special attention. If it had not been for Riley he might have been trodden under foot before the majority of those present knew that he was there.

"Ho, there, you war chief!" shouted Riley, seeing some of his own men in the crowd. "This way, and all together! Stand by me, and law and order!"

He drew the doctor out of the clutches of Chriss Crockly, dealing the latter a blow that sent him staggering back among the men of his own ilk. Then his men came with a rush, and as Riley, still holding on to the arm of his newly made partner, put himself at their head, they all surged forward with a trained and unexpected vigor, that carried them to the men who were leisurely knotting a rope around the neck of Ah Chung. Before these men knew what was coming Riley had torn their victim from their hands, had flung him into the midst of his own party, and then coolly faced the howling mob.

"Gentlemen," he cried, "where is the ringmaster of this circus? I want to see his license."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

RILEY IS READY, AND THE REST ARE ALL THERE, AT THE FINISH.

THE presence of the men from the War Chief seemed to Riley to be providential, and he did not stop to inquire how they happened to be there. With backing enough, so that the performance did not seem to be altogether ridiculous, he was willing to bluff against the whole town. If his blood was once up, and he was committed to the task, he would just as soon do it, anyhow.

Chriss Crockly had been the recognized leader of the rioters; and at present Chriss was almost out of the ring. Riley could hit hard, and had given him "all that was in the shop." Those behind the scenes looked around for Orange Able, or one of his lieutenants. It was not comfortable to attack a man like Ready Riley, when he had a gang of his workmen at his back. It was a mystery why he should be there, as the friend of the very man he had been for some time expected to kill; but, there was no accounting for anything that Riley might do, he was so very ready. In the lull that followed, while the men were beginning to handle their weapons, and look around for some one to take the lead, it became evident that something was going on not far away, that had not been noticed on the bills.

Back, a few hundred yards away, there was shooting, and something that looked like a confused *melee*, in which horsemen and men on foot were mixed.

There was a brief hesitation, and then a dozen of the rioters began a rush in that direction. As they approached the spot the voice of Stephen Greene was heard, and there was very little of the laugh in it.

"Back there, men, until you know whether you want to chip against the whole United States Government, or not! We are here after Captain Crosseye and his gang; and, by the living lightnings, we have them! Riley, look out for the man with one eye!"

The caution was just in time. One-Eyed Edd was in the crowd, biding his time. Dan Garland was his mark, and he believed that

Ah Chung was that astute and slippery gentleman. If the crowd would save him the trouble, he would be very well satisfied; otherwise he would provide himself for his taking off. As Greene spoke he had just made up his mind that there was a hitch in the programme, and that it was time for him to get to work. From his belt he drew a revolver, the hammer flying back as it came up.

Riley looked around, but he was on the wrong side to see. A bonfire that had been started shed light on the scene, and there were half a dozen men between him and the man with one eye.

Dr. Farley was a little nearer, and saw better. As the pistol came into line he sprung forward to grasp the man. He was not ready to shoot yet, since he was not sure that all could not be arranged without bloodshed.

The movement brought him between Ah Chung and the outlaw, and the latter, with a snarling curse, changed his aim and pulled trigger.

Two men went down; but neither of them was the doctor. Ira Wickfield came a little late; but, as usual, he came for all that he was worth. He, too, saw the man with one eye; saw what he was at; and that the doctor was to be the victim. He had no time for further thought. He was not a shooter; and even Seven-shot Steve would have found it hard to get in a bullet before One-Eyed Edd could slay his man. Without hesitation Mr. Wickfield threw himself right into range, striking as he came.

Probably Ira did not understand the chances, but it was a very gallant thing for him to do, anyhow. Down went One-Eyed Edd; but down went Wickfield, also, with a bullet through his shoulder, just as Riley, with a great leap, landed full on top of the outlaw, knocking him senseless with his heavy boots, and completing the discomfiture of the Crosseyes.

Then Nina, with one hand in that of Morton Blackburn, was hanging around the neck of her father with the other arm; Miss Hilgarda was holding in her lap the head of the prostrate Ira, and asking him wildly if he was dead; while half a dozen resolute looking men were already beginning to move away with their prisoners, of whom Orange Able seemed to be the chief.

Some one, with the pertinacity of the average American, looked around for the Chinaman; but he had long since taken advantage of the diversion and slipped out of the hands of captors and friends. By this time he was half-way to Hard Hack Gulch. He never reappeared in Broad Ax, but it may be as well to say here that Mort Blackburn hunted him up in the morning, and handed him not only a month's wages, but a gratuity that made him open his eyes, and almost wish for a necktie party every week.

The worst men of the mob were already disposed of. The rest began to ask what it all meant. In a few moments it was whispered that Dan Garland, the famous detective, had come to Broad Ax to capture the well-known gang of road-agents led by Captain Crosseye, and that he had just corraled his men.

Ira Wickfield was the only man who had received any serious harm. There was a disposition to crowd around him, but, when his friends helped him into the house the crowd dispersed, or such part of it as did not follow the little band of sworn officials, who, assisted by the men from the War Chief and Red Horse, escorted the prisoners to the lock-up.

In the cottage the same little party was gathered that had occupied the parlor before the riot. Mr. Wickfield had received the attentions of the doctor without wincing, and was no doubt delighted to learn that there was no serious damage done. If he did not belong to Hilgarda from this time on, there was no trust to be put in appearances.

When Nina had told her little story, without at all explaining the strangeness of Dr. Levant's conduct, her father was sorely puzzled. He could not believe that the man whom he had received into his house, and almost into his confidence, could be the notorious Captain Crosseye; yet, it began to look that way. Whether it was or was not, he had a word or two to say to Mr. Garland,

the great detective. He straightened himself up and turned to Blackburn.

"I suppose it is certain now that your object in coming here was the capture of these men; but, do you know, for a while I actually thought you were after me. This will account for the coldness I showed you at the time of our meeting at the Happy Home. It is hard to tell how such a wild idea could have taken possession of my brain, but for some time past there were hours when I was a little off, and I thought only of the things that have been settled and done for ever so long. I need not tell you how deeply I feel the obligations under which you have placed me, and I hope some day to be able to return them in quantity if not in kind."

The doctor had taken Blackburn's hand, and was shaking it most cordially, unmindful of the strange smile on his face. His answer was a staggerer.

"My dear doctor, for any little favors that you may think I have rendered I can only say that I was too happy to have the opportunity to show them. But as for being Dan Garland, his kin or confidant, I must say that I know nothing about the gentleman, or his business, and I would sooner have seen myself a good deal further if I had supposed, when I gave you that name, you would mistake me for the gentle detective."

"In the name of Heaven, who are you, then?"

"In the name of Heaven, I am a young man, who has had a varied experience in life. I have been a surgeon in the navy, a miner, an explorer, a rolling stone that has picked up some moss, and at odd times I am afraid, something of a sport. My name is Morton Blackburn, and I am your daughter's humble adorer."

The blank amazement on the face of the doctor brought a smile to the lips of every one in spite of themselves.

"And—and if that is the case, who is Dan Garland?"

The overturn of his theory was so sudden that he forgot to be angry at mention of the name of Blackburn, and could think of nothing else to say.

It was Stephen Greene who answered:

"Dan Garland is a gentleman who does not care to reveal himself or his methods to his victims. In confidence, mind you, and with the idea that it will go no further, I might say that I am that unworthy thief-taker, and that, as I have finished my work here, and as the consolidation of the Red Horse and War Chief will let me out, it is hardly necessary for me to ask you to look out for a new superintendent. I do not want to be inquisitive, but, do you not think it would be as well to explain to these gentlemen what it was you fear my coming for? I think you can clear your skirts fully."

"Certainly, since I am now in my normal mood. In my youth I was teller in a bank when the funds were found to be short, and an effort was made by the relatives of the guilty party to direct suspicion toward me. I proved my innocence to the satisfaction of the Board, but the president was pleased to say: 'It may be that you are innocent, but if you have shared in this guilt, I will hunt you down, if it takes a life-time.' It was the son of this man who was the guilty party, and who had to suffer. I left the bank shortly after, and had not thought of the threat for years. When in this abnormal condition I have spoken of, all came back to me, more vividly, even, than then. I imagined the world knew of my supposed crime, and was waiting for Dan Garland to say, come."

"And if you knew how nearly that abnormal condition came to becoming normal, you would be thankful for your escape," said Blackburn. "I did the best I could, without alarming you, and have been watching you ever since, with more solicitude than you were aware of."

"You!" exclaimed the doctor, in surprise.

"Yes. As Doctor Levant, late of the navy. You never seemed to remember the particulars of our meeting the evening of your accident, and the supposed operation that I performed. I warned Nina then that you might wake up a little off; and when you went out to take the town I followed you in another guise—this—to see that you did not come to harm. Ah Chung, the first, I was near you,

to doctor after the best light I had, and if I came several times to your aid in this garb it was because you would not allow me near you in the one I could call my own. That villain, Able, got hold of the Levant disguise to-night, and expected to use it to some purpose, but as he is now in the hands of our friend, the detective, it is not likely that he can give you any more trouble. I have shown you in several different ways what I can be. Now, if you will not allow me to show you what I really am I suppose it is best to say farewell, and go."

He bowed gravely as he ceased speaking, cast on Nina a look of love and reproach, and seemed about to turn away.

"Hold on, hold on!" shouted the doctor, moved in spite of himself. "I have not entirely reached my normal condition, and perhaps it is just as well that I never will. This is quite a little family party, and it would not be complete without you. I don't understand it all yet, but I am willing to have you go on explaining, if it takes a year. And between times you may find something interesting to say to Nina. The fact is, at one time in my life I was something of a sport myself, and had a horror of having Nina meet with any of the class. But they are sometimes good to have in the family, and I don't see how I could seriously object to one who knew the Bacterian Theory of Disease, better than myself. What is the matter, Hilgarda? Why those tears?"

"Can you ask, after the explanation you have given?"

"What explanation do you mean? I see nothing to cry over?"

"And it was all over, years and years ago! Oh, Lucius, I thought—I thought—"

"Well, what did you think?" asked Farley, as his sister ceased speaking and sobbed again.

"That—that it was something that had happened lately. I thought—oh-h-h—that you had been spending more money than you could afford, and had—had been a road-agent to—to make up the deficiency."

Instead of an outburst of wrath, the doctor broke into a laugh that was so hearty it was contagious. When it was time to stop, his face again grew serious.

"Nothing very serious has happened from all this masquerading that seems to have been going on, but the chances were immense. Let us be thankful that good has come out of it."

There is very little more to explain. Dan Garland had warned the men of the War Chief and Red Horse to be on hand, and he had half a dozen of his own men, whom he had smuggled into the town. When he was at the mine his men were on the watch, and after half a dozen conversations of Orange Able had been overheard, it had not been hard for him to keep the run of things, even if Mort Blackburn and his disguises had puzzled him for a time. He had no difficulty in securing the conviction of the Crosseyes, from Orange down, and so far as Broad Ax went, never revealed his identity, save to the select few. It was never known who fired the shot that creased the doctor, but as it did no lasting harm, the probable accident was never investigated.

Dr. Farley and his partners found their profit in the partnership that Dan Garland had suggested, and as Mort Blackburn was one of those partners the reader can easily guess that Nina had become his wife. Ira and Hilgarda were married at the same time, and are exceedingly happy. She still, at times, has "notions," but they are of the harmless kind, and Ira, though a little slow, is a good man to tie to.

THE END.

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